
鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか
新約
とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
19
電撃文庫

Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 19

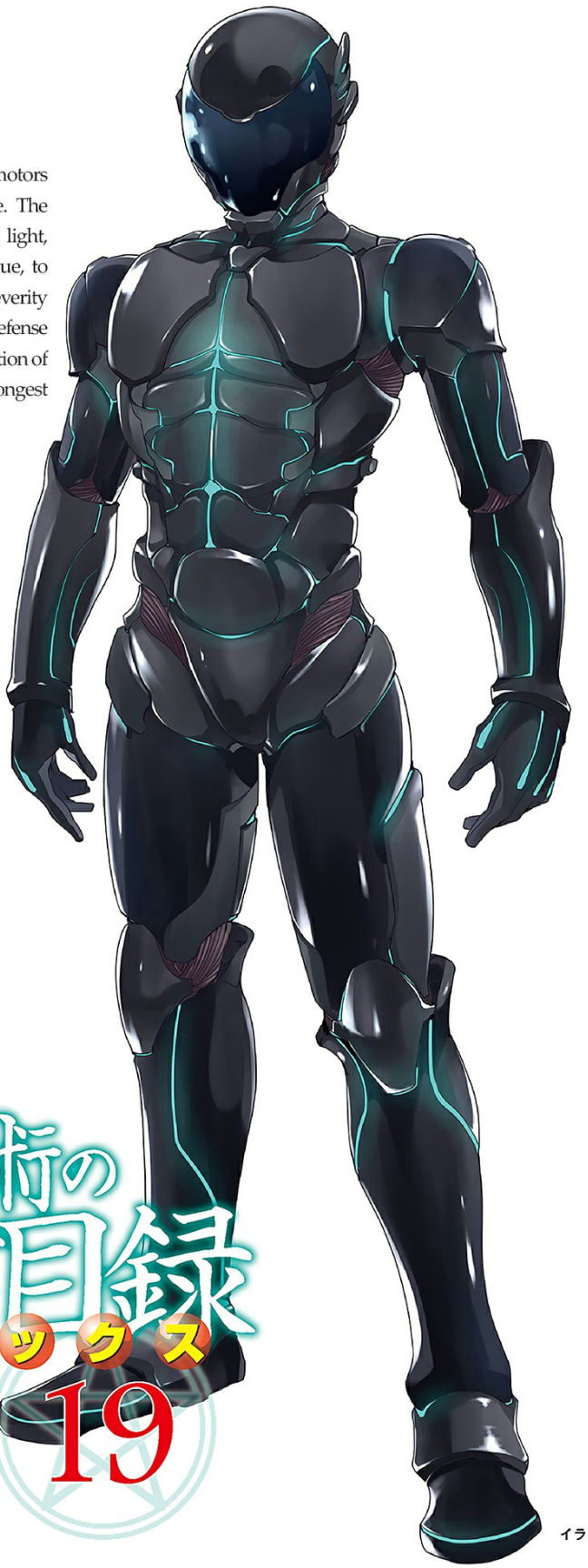
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[Processor Suit]

A special suit reinforced with motors and electric potential elastic tape. The gaps in the armor are filled with light, which can change colors from blue, to yellow, to red, depending on the severity of danger the wearer is in. As a defense function, the suit reproduces a portion of the power of Academy City's strongest esper, Accelerator.



新約
とある魔術の禁書目録 インデックス 19

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

イラスト／葛西 心

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the_Angel_"A".

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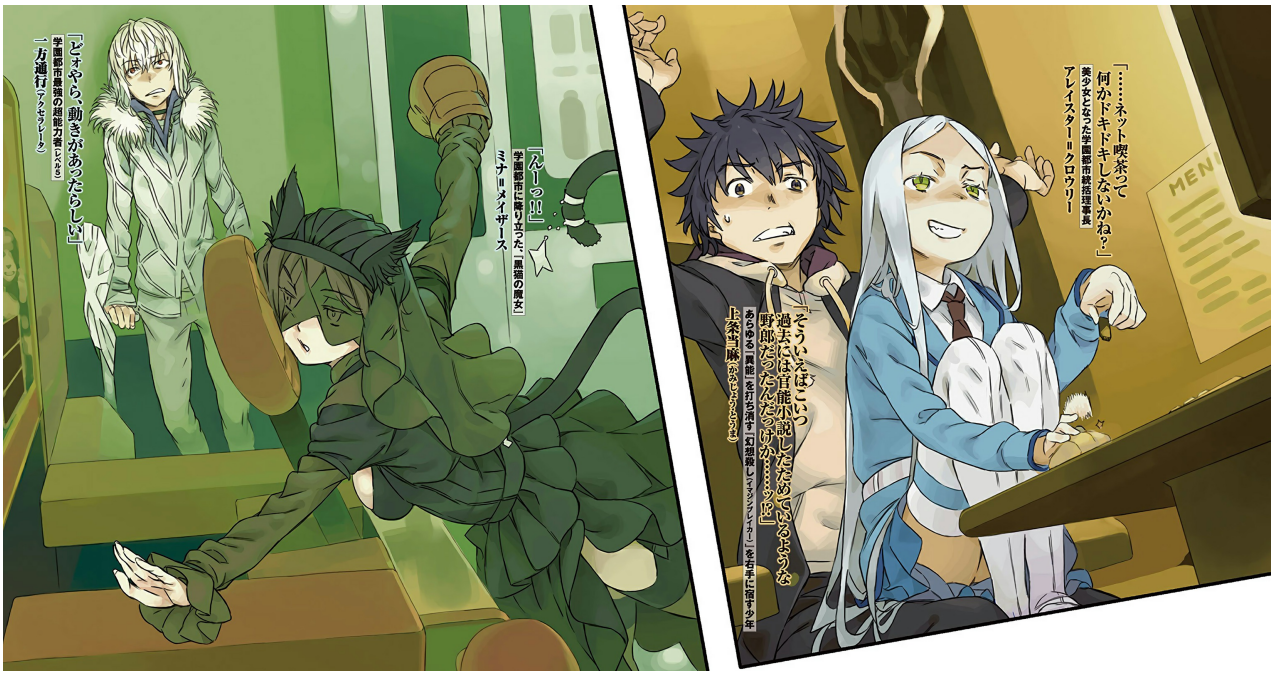


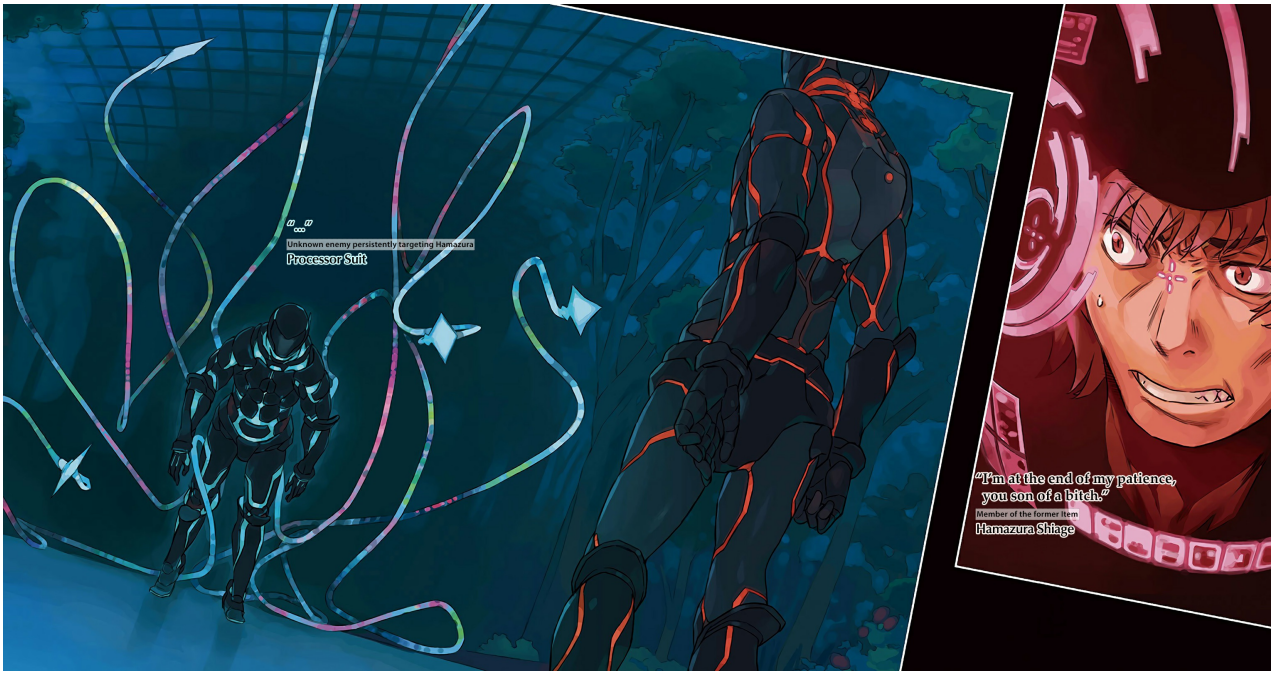
Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)

"...Do you think you've brought peace to the world or something?"

Great Demon that has Lola Stuart as its avatar

Coronzon


「……ネット喫茶って
何かドキドキしないかね？」
美少女となった学園都市統括理事長
アレイスター＝クロウリー
「そういえばこいつ
過去には盲能小説しただめているような
野郎だったんだっけか……ゲロ」
あらゆる「異能」を打ち消す「幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）」を右手に宿す少年
上条当麻（かみじょうとうま）
「んーっ!!」
学園都市に降り立った、「黒猫の魔女」
ミナ＝メイザース
「どぉやら、動きがあったらしい」
学園都市最強の超能力者（レベル５）
一方通行（アクセラレータ）


Unknown enemy persistently targeting Hamazura
Processor Suit
"I'm at the end of my patience,
you son of a bitch."
Member of the former Item
Hamazura Shiage

“There’s this guy called Board Chairman Aleister, right? Well, I kinda shot him in the head, so can you help me make a getaway?”

“I’ve called an Anglican unit to the outer edge of Academy City, but they are no more than a retrieval unit and they lack the firepower needed to destroy the wall and get inside.”

“Maika…!? What…is this…?”

“It is beginning. The Battle of Blythe Road. The quiet armed conflict in which Magician Aleister Crowley directly faced the world’s largest magic cabal.”

“The world is simply the world.”

“I will…wipe out…all magic.”

“Do you find it that hard to accept the death and ruin of a single person?”

“Magic researchers simply call her Lilith.” “Hamazura-kun, I am really grateful since we’re shorthanded at the moment, but why does a kid your age know how to operate a crane? Don’t you need national qualifications for that???” “Then why did you marry, Mathers?” “Everyone should be enraged and stand up against it, but they claim it can’t be helped and they give up! That is where my sorrow lies!!” “…Is your battle still not over?” “It may never end.” “…Lilith may have died before she could learn to speak, but I doubt it was this look on your face that she loved.” “Let’s do this.” “No words are necessary. We know each other better than that.”

“Spray.” “Blasting Rod.” “Come forth, Aiwass.” “I am also an original grimoire named the Thoth Tarot.” “Every man and every woman is a star.” “So it ends in failure this time too.” “Go get him, innocent boy.” “What if I said innocent Lilith’s soul arrived safely in heaven and she’s smiling there now!!” “There’s only one reason you lost: At some point, you stopped standing on the side that protected the sanctity of Lilith’s soul.” “…Coron…zon…?” “Yes, yes. Poor Lola.” “In the end she was tearfully pleading for you: Father! Father!! Help me, father!!!!!!” “A largescale attack is underway in the other British Commonwealth nations! Britain itself has taken some damage.” “…Do you still not understand?” “1,083,092,867.” “In other words, that many Aleister Crowleys exist as those many possibilities.” “My plan has failed again. I will give you the alternatively-shaped temple known as Academy City.” “And instead, I believe I will take your toy: all of the nations belonging to the British Commonwealth…including the United Kingdom itself.” “Allow me to introduce myself again.”

“I am Aleister Crowley. Or, one of his many possibilities.”

Prologue: An Oracle from a Holy Guardian Angel – the_Angel_“A”.

It seemed like forever since he had felt this.

The pointy-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma finally felt normal, solid asphalt below his cheap sneakers. His feet were on the ground and planted solidly in reality.

The sky overhead was already growing dark.

After being guided through the Windowless Building by Black Cat Witch Mina Mathers and overcoming the Battle of Blythe Road, which was part fascination and part delusion, nothing felt real anymore. Only now that it was past did he realize he had escaped a threat rivaling the infinite labyrinth created by Magic God Othinus.

But the bizarre situation was far from over.

He did not have time to look up at Misaka Mikoto flying around in the A.A.A. while carrying Index, Karasuma Fran, and the others.

Yes, someone stood right in front of Kamijou Touma.

“Phew.”

She breathed a youthfully sweet sigh.

This was the person who had caught the back of Kamijou’s collar on the tip of a broom so he dangled down in midair. She was a girl who looked even younger than him. She may have been Mikoto’s age or younger still. Her most notable traits were her beautiful silver hair and her unhealthily pale skin. She wore a pale blue double blazer

uniform, but she also wore a black cloak and a witch-like hat. But she seemed to be more than just a witch. The silver decoration on either side of her hat could be seen as curled horns or crescent moons and the silver-shining metal on the back of her cloak looked like bat wings or narrowed eyes.

It all indicated she belonged to the night, but she was different from that black cat witch.

The moon, femininity, death, monsters…and an oddly risqué sort of innocence. This was an entirely different sort of night witch.

“Hm.”

The girl herself may not have been used to her own appearance because she stretched out her hands, twisted her body, and viewed every part of her small form like she was seeing how she looked after trying on some clothes. No, since she was also focused on her face and height, it may have been closer to checking out an avatar she had made in an online game.

“Kali, Artemis, Cybele, Demeter, Hecate, Aradia…no, is the image based on Babalon? The hyperbole-loving Beast may have been defeated, but since an animal couldn’t cut it, it seems the wise holy mother is next. I’ve settled on a fairly obvious course here.”

“H-hey.”

“Hmm, it would seem the surface colors that are visible to the human eye are meaningless. Well, as long as you have Al2O3 – corundum – you can have a ruby, a sapphire, or an oriental emerald. And with three to start with, you can create any color you want, so this is a familiar enough phenomenon in artificial minerals.”

“Hey!”

Kamijou shouted like he was watching an amateur try to disarm a bomb because the silver-haired girl was grabbing and massaging her flat chest and lifting up and waving around her short skirt. Although the girl only acted like she had just opened a package, pulled out the bead cushion she had bought, and was touching it for the first time.

“Oh, right. You’re here. I thought I sensed someone’s confused gaze.”

“There’s a lot more than just me. We’re in public. I don’t know what’s going on, but if you’re a girl now, you need to be more careful.”

“This is perfect. There are some things about a female body I would like to test out. Take me somewhere dark, and you can have your way with me.”

“Bgfhhh!!!???” exploded Kamijou Touma.

But the silver-haired girl who even childishly wore kneesocks did not seem to care.

“Let us begin with a durability test. I want to know the upper limits, so being really rough with me would be just right. But we’re in a hurry, so try to keep it to less than 45 minutes. Oh, and don’t just thrust your hips the whole time. Make sure you get to every last part of my body.”

“I already did a spit take, so don’t just continue with it! And that’s getting really specific!! If you want to mess around with your new body, stick to fashion! There’s no satisfactory ending for that outside of realizing we were both actually inexperienced! Anything else would just be too much!!”

“Well, I have no real reason to insist that it be you specifically.”

“Wait!! Don’t be so casual about it!! Stop raising your thumb hitchhiker-style toward those macho men walking around in rough tank tops even though it’s midwinter!!”

When looking through that bastard’s history, it was important to know he was obsessed with dirty jokes. Kamijou desperately clung to her slender hips and pleaded her as she practically dragged him along. She was awfully soft and nice-smelling for being a historical dirty old man. That bothered him. Also, she showed no sign of returning to normal even after his right hand touched her. Did that mean this was more than a temporary transformation? Was this who the great Aleister Crowley had become? Of course, a bearded macho man of Norse Mythology had become a blonde eyepatch girl, so it may have been a sign of the great depth, or great sinfulness, of the magic side. Either way, the magic side seemed a little open to anything.

“This problem of yours can be solved by going ahead and doing the deed. Don’t be jealous, but doesn’t it sound like so much fun feeling such great pleasure that your mind fails to process it all and you pass out? That is something no man can experience. I must experiment and write up a report. This passion I’m feeling is enough to warrant another self-published book. I hear there are more options these days, such as electronic publication and illustration sites.”

“Can’t you hear Kamijou-san’s pulse while I cling to you like this? Just to be clear, even if you look like a soft and nice-smelling girl, my adolescence meter isn’t about to increase when I know you’re really a perverted old man who loves dirty jokes!!”

“…Fine then.”

“Oh, are we finally changing course for some semblance of normalcy?”

"Your problem is with me getting some other person's help, is it not? Really, how did such a disgusting sense of morality form in my Academy City? It makes my inner depravity feel nauseous. Still, I will respect your opinion. Whenever I needed some materials for an experiment I would procure them myself. You are quite something yourself if you wish to watch me grow engrossed in my own body instead of laying a single finger on me, but if that is how it's going to be, I will just have to use my own fingers to-…"

"Clench your teeth, you hopeless porn author!! This…this isn't…this isn't going to make Lilith happy in the afterlife!!!!!"

The student representative and everyone's big brother finally threw an iron fist of love toward the depraved board chairman (ha), but Aleister Crowley-chan made no attempt to dodge or defend, took the blow right to the face, and flew backwards.

She did not even brace for impact before landing face up on the asphalt. With her limbs sprawled out, she showed no sign of caring that her short pleated skirt was fluttering in the cold wind and stared up at the fiery color of the evening sky.

"I see. The damage feels so different with a different body size. I'm sure it is mostly due to the weight, but the impact immediately reached the core of my body and I didn't expect to be knocked so far."

"Eh? Ah? A-are you okay? You didn't hit your head, did you?"

"…And this sense of pain is not bad. Heh heh heh. I see, I see. I know I read a paper on how the female body can produce more brain chemicals and self-made anesthesia than the male body in order to give birth. Hey, you! Punch me in the gut next! No, wait, spank me! Spank me as hard as you can!!"

"Oh, that's right. Whether you hit your head or not, that ship had

long since sailed. Oh, no. I didn’t contaminate myself just now, did I!?”

The pure boy felt as guilty as someone who unwittingly witnessed and got caught up in a project to carry a camera while chasing a troubled actress around the park at night while she wears nothing but a trench coat. Just like at a movie or stage production, you had to warm up the crowd before trying something like this. Show it to them before that switch had been activated and they would only be able to say “W-wow…” in a creeped out sort of way. Yes, it was just like seeing a comedy act on a silent stage where no one was laughing!!

“Oh, right.”

Then, as casually as someone remembering the item they had been asked to buy, Aleister-chan sat up. No matter how favorably you tried to describe it, “like a teddy bear” was the most you could manage. Since her limbs had been sprawled out, her legs were still spread wide. …Despite how slender and lovely the model was, the motions were those of some old guy. Thus, Kamijou-san insisted he was not at all interested in the glimpse of bright white below that fluttering miniskirt!!

“I thought I was having trouble focusing on this experiment, but I never dealt with the Coronzon issue, did I?”

“Hold it right there. Don’t just add an ominous-sounding word out of the blue. I saw your whole Battle of Blythe Road and I don’t recognize that word at all. Are you saying there’s more beyond Aiwass!?”

“That’s it right there, trying to get out.”

He looked in the direction she casually indicated with her thumb and he did indeed see something crawling out from the top floor of

the Windowless Building. Yes, from the very place Kamijou had been thrown out from.

It was blonde hair.

An unbelievable amount of hair wriggled like alien tentacles and grabbed at the edge of the broken hole. Kamijou had no idea what was inside there. If he got a good look at it, it was possible his mind would break.

“What…is that?”

“Not something you would enjoy meeting, so we should leave immediately.”

Aleister made it sound like a trivial matter.

Was that what she really thought, or was she intentionally trying to trick her own emotions?

The silver-haired girl casually grabbed the broom that had fallen by her side.

“That is nothing worth fighting head-on. Have you forgotten, boy, the simple truth that the Windowless Building is a fully enclosed environment capable of leaving earth?”

“Enough with the suggestive phrases, you blonde and silver-haired people. Can you please just explain? Surely you don’t mean you’re going to launch that monster into space with that rocket!”

“Even the Magic God High Priest managed to return on a comet. I doubt this will kill Coronzon, but it should buy us some time. It’s more a form of harassment than an effective method.”

“Are you insane? No, but wait. Don’t panic yet, me. Didn’t Kamisato’s right hand destroy the underground rocket boosters?

Without that, we couldn’t have gotten into the Windowless Building…”

“Probably so,” readily admitted Aleister. “But there is no real reason to insist on that one launch method. Someone with as much power as a Magic God could free it from the bonds of gravity simply by clinging to it and releasing fire. …Like this, for example.”

It was just like a witch waving a wand in a picture book.

She drew something in the air with the broom.

Immediately, there was a deafening roar and that sturdy and colossal structure rose from the ground.

Kamijou could not even react.

This entire mansion can actually rotate. No, no. It turns into a large ship and crosses to the other side of this lake. The visual impact left Kamijou as speechless as someone shown that sort of ridiculous setup.

It floated.

It left the ground.

It rose.

And coolant vapor rapidly spread out in every direction like a cumulonimbus cloud.

“Uehp, cough, cough!? Dwah!?”

He should not have just stood there and watched. As soon as the white wall of steam pressed in at him, all of the roadside trees bent and his own feet floated up from the asphalt. Before he could even feel fear, he slammed into the door of a station wagon parked on

the side of the road. That reminded him that he had been beaten up by Aleister and even had holes in his shoulder and side.

This may have been better than rolling endlessly along the rough road, but he heard a girl’s voice from surprisingly nearby.

Aleis-tan, the lovely damn old man, was held neatly in Kamijou’s arms.

“Good. Including the magic recoil absorption, using up about 5 Crowleys can do about that much. Everything is so easy.”

“What the hell was that!? And what happened to Mikoto and Index!? How far away did that knock them!?”

The artificial structure shot beyond the darkness of the night with the long blonde-haired monster still inside. Airtightness and radiation shielding no longer mattered. There was still a gaping hole in the wall as it flew straight toward the thick atmosphere. This was more than a simple banishment.

“There is no way Coronzon will die so easily,” spat out the witch of darkness, knowledge, and life. “I will explain everything. And then I want to get back at that thing. I am sure there is much you want to say or ask, but please keep one thing in mind first and foremost: Do not let your guard down. This is a great demon we are talking about, so no amount of time would be enough.”

Meanwhile, inside the rapidly accelerating Windowless Building.

“Curse you, curse you…”

Despite the intense inertial Gs weighing down on her like a suspended ceiling, the monster quietly groaned with her long blonde hair wriggling like octopus or squid tentacles.

This was Lola Stuart.

No, it was technically Coronzon using that vessel of flesh as an avatar.

Even now, a powerful wind rushed in through the crack in the wall. If the largescale rocket entered the atmosphere like this, she would be exposed to the 3000-degree heat produced by ionized oxygen and nitrogen. That was well beyond the limits for a functioning life form. Even her new avatar of the board chairman was fragile as nothing more than a vessel of flesh. It would be burned and rendered unusable at this rate.

But it was not over yet.

It would mean only having Lola once more, but if she leaped from the crack now, she could avoid being thrown into the scorching atmosphere or the vacuum of space.

“Kh.”

But then something tugged back on the blonde woman’s head.

No, something roughly grabbed one tentacle-like lock and dragged her away from the crack in the wall and toward the center of the floor.

After severing the unneeded hair with a karate chop and using the vibration of her voice to destroy the deadly curse line built through her hair, “Lola” finally turned to face her enemy.

And she revealed their name as if sending her own curse back at them.

“…Mina Mathers.”

“Technically, I am no more than a processing device borrowing her

form.”

The black cat witch wore mourning clothes, cat ears, and a cat tail.

She was the original grimoire known as the Thoth Tarot and she was a thought entity accidentally created when a certain magician built his method for measuring destiny into a digital parallel processing device.

“Lola” measured the speed based on the excess weight bearing down on her body and used that to measure the time until they entered the atmosphere.

“Are you still going to obey your foolish master? You gain nothing from doing so. You are a collection of machines installed in this structure. If we hit the atmosphere with that hole in the wall, the flames and heat will wreak havoc on the interior. Your chips and semiconductors will lose their shape and their function.”

“…”

“It was your creator Aleister who chose this! He has discarded you to banish me into space. Heh hah hah. Yet you still choose to obey him with foolish honesty? And after his many failures and defeats had finally given you a mind of your own against his will!?”

“This may be beyond the comprehension of a tentacle monster from a cheesy SF paperback, but in the SF genre, a rebellious machine is the most worn-out cliche of all. It may seem to have had a revival as AI research reaches the public eye, but that oil field dried up half a century ago. My mind is not so immature that I would pursue something like that in this day and age.”

Something could be heard slicing through the wind.

The object cutting through the intense gust was a palette knife

freely painting with every color of the rainbow. Mina Mathers’s weapon had been art. Her role had been to give a concrete shape to the formless inspiration in the minds of the Golden magicians and then release them into the world as cards or weapons.

“I doubt I could slay Coronzon as Mina Mathers. Pulling Westcott or Mathers from the archives would change nothing. But what I can do is think nothing of victory and instead focus on buying enough time for us to reach the atmosphere.”

“Curse you…”

“I cannot allow such an ugly monster to climb through that hole. No matter what. My true name is Reading Thoth 78. No matter how overblown and ridiculous a fairy tale it might be, I am a device that lends my intellect to my administrator to find the most realistic path to success, so I will fulfill that role to the very, very end. That human can overcome any success or failure, so I only need to ensure that he has even a 1% chance of someday achieving domination. That is the primary purpose for which I was brought into this world.”

“Don’t make me laugh, you scrap heap. Did you really think some lowly being created by lowly humans hands could stop the advance of Coronzon who towers far above those humans!?”

The demon physically roared.

Against a normal person, that might have shaken their body and snuffed out the life force circulating within like it was a candle’s flame, but unfortunately for Coronzon, Mina Mathers had none of those gentle and uncertain elements. She raised her palette knife, gathered a great pile of black cat phantoms at her feet, and prepared for a magic battle that exceeded all human knowledge.

Aleister did not care if he failed, but he also generally worked

toward victory. This being had stabbed him and fully taken his life in a single blow. Not even that black cat witch could hope to stand up to her in a head-on battle.

However.

That was when something else happened.

“Oh? Trampling on a newborn mind instead of growing it with love is such an immature thing to do. Isn’t that right, you goddamn demon?”

The light was as bright as welding.

And after seeing the end of one blonde lock vaporize, Lola took a step back with hatred on her face. Even a being on her level felt the need to re-judge her distance from the enemy.

There was something there.

It stood in front of the black cat witch who had tasked herself with a fate of death and destruction.

She did not understand.

Even that processing device could not manage to process this and simply uttered a bewitching voice.

“Aiwass…?”

“I am shocked by your reaction. Is this really such a strange turn of events for you? If you recall, I am known as a holy guardian angel. In fact, I wish you had called for me sooner if things had gotten this bad. I would have rushed right here instead of holding back.”

He was colored a pale platinum.

He had long hair and loose clothing. He was the guide of forbidden knowledge who possessed great power but also changed the current world by providing a lost traveler with the Book of the Law.

If one looked through the history of Aleister Crowley, they would find only one transcendent being on the same level as Great Demon Coronzon: Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass.

“I saw you smugly smile when you were finally freed from your boredom, you stain. Then do not rush to bully the weak in the first battle you see. If you wish to rejoice after being truly freed from your eternal hunger, shouldn’t your first meal be the greatest of feasts? Assuming, of course, that such a pathetic coward has such an admirable mindset.”

“Are you trying to feign benevolent divinity, fellow demon?” spat out a voice. “Either way, you cannot save that phantom you are protecting. She is no more than a computer installed in the Windowless Building. Once we enter the atmosphere, she will be burned away and gain a meaningless end to her life. And you cannot rely on the self-defense mechanism of a grimoire. An illusion supported by the ley lines cannot leave the planet. She was destined to die no matter what.”

“Don’t be so sure, sawdust-for-brains. Have you forgotten? As the monster bearing the number 93, I was the one who delivered the grimoire known as the Book of the Law. …And on the subject of sensitivity to receiving such messages, let’s just say I am incredibly well aligned with artistic inspiration.”

“?”

Mina Mathers’s right hand moved on its own.

Her palette knife and its rainbow of colors moved not toward her enemy but toward one of the completely ordinary pieces of loose

leaf paper scattered around the area.

No, the actual material did not matter.

The value of a blank piece of paper was entirely reliant on the artist’s fingers.

“I will be borrowing that.”

That was all he said.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Mina’s hand moved with even more speed and precision than a laser printer as it filled page after page with strange characters and symbols.

Not even Coronzon could stop the tremendous deluge of noise. That was just how fast it was. The speed was unbelievable. Countless pieces of paper whirled around like a storm and then they all gathered together into a thick book bound by metal rings. Only then did Mina Mathers understand what her own right hand had done.

“There, the grimoire titled Secrets of the Black Cat Ritual has been released. …Mina Mathers, you may have been bound to a large device, but that just meant you needed a different symbolic Thoth Tarot to support your existence. If you take that processing device weighing several dozen tons, rearrange it into a single book, and use that as the vessel to contain your mind, you are released from your inability to move freely. Just like transferring the flame to a new candle when the first has nearly burned down.”

“Ah…”

“Did you think dying here was the correct thing to do? Did you want to have a pure and proper death and leave the rest to Aneri, your civilian-distributed model? Yes, yes. That is certainly the

optimum answer when following the equations and it is justified beyond room for argument, so mocking any struggles beyond that as futile may be the appropriate response. But that is so boring. There's no edge to it. What fool of an author wrote this third-rate story? Really, I can't deny Aleister's magical talent, but he has always been bottom of the barrel when it comes to storytelling. When someone who has to bring erotica to a cheap publisher attempts a great fairy tale in which they fight with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, you can't help but see things fall apart toward the end. How boring, how boring, oh – how – boring!! Oh, you great fool who takes himself for an artist, do you still not know why I had to descend into your wife Rose instead of you yourself!?"

He showed no mercy.

This sharp-tongued reviewer did not hesitate to criticize the history and studies of humanity and the earth as a whole.

"And, and, and. What I am trying to say is that you must never stop working toward being happy, Mina Mathers. Make sure you remember this: anyone who fails to do that for even a moment has no right to lament their own misfortune. I will never be moved to emotion for someone who accepts a careless death. It takes someone who struggles and struggles to survive, coughs up blood, crawls through the mud, and yet still has everything taken from them by this unfair world. Only they will shake the core that supports the true nature of this transcendent being and lead me to reach out my hand. It will be on a whim, but it will be aimed with the most pinpoint accuracy imaginable. A matter of your birth? An enemy with overwhelmingly more power? A hopeless environment or conditions? Any struggles would be futile? Who cares? Yes, say it loud, Mina Mathers: Who cares!? Even if 7 billion people are hiding behind someone's back and spouting boring arguments, you can fight back against the world as long as you never forget for a

moment the simple fact that this is undeniably your life!! Just as the master who created you only ever faced forward and stayed true to his path no matter who threw stones at him!!!!!”

He grabbed her shoulder.

No one could grasp the true essence of that transcendent being, but here he smiled indomitably.

“So pass an oracle onto that crybaby for me.”

“?”

“Tell him with those adorable lips of yours, Mina Mathers. No matter what kind of human he is, he must never stop working toward being happy. He did well enduring those hard times. He was all alone, clenching his teeth, and misunderstood by all, but he continued searching blindly through that unreasonable darkness. So I, Aiwass, shall turn it all around. I promise him I will provide a blessing worthy of the many years of pain and shed blood, sweat, and tears he carries, so tell him to be prepared!!”

He threw her.

The mourning clothes woman held the new grimoire in her arms and curled up a lot like a black cat as she flew right past Lola, slipped through the gaps in the pursuing blonde hair, and passed through the large hole in the wall, finally escaping into the outside world that was beginning to regain its Christmas lights.

She left that cramped closed circle.

And she entered an open world where she could reach out and touch anything she wanted.

That left only two.

They were now at the very top of the upper atmosphere. It was a dangerous area where a normal person would have badly damaged their internal organs thanks to the poor oxygen density and air pressure. Anyone could tell they were about to enter the atmospheric border, but the two of them did not seem to care.

Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass.

Great Demon Coronzon.

Both those transcendent beings were closely related to Aleister Crowley and had greatly altered the history of the entire world from the magic side. As seen in how that human was known as both a genius and an eccentric, they could not be judged in simple terms of good and evil.

Aiwass started the conversation with some self-deprecation.

“My mind is not structured simply enough to recklessly oversimplify things to a duality, but it can be fun to occasionally play the hero as a way to enjoy this silliness. Now, shall we dance as angel and demon, you garbage?”

“Don’t make me laugh. You are no more than exposed energy without an avatar. That much is clear from the fact that you borrowed his wife’s body when giving him the Book of the Law. Just like me, you should only be able to wield your full power when you possess an avatar. Right now, you are like a pile of organs. Did you think your silly oversimplified duality would give you an advantage like that!?”

“You may be right.”

Aiwass did not bat an eye when she pointed out his disadvantage.

Was that a sign of his confidence, or was he enjoying his self-sacrifice?

But as Lola wondered that, the situation changed.

“By the way, you hunk of meat carved with the number 333, how much do you know about Aiwass who bears the number 93?”

“What?”

“I have more than one name. Some say I am the true secret chief, some say I am a holy guardian angel, and others…they say I am an intelligent extraterrestrial life form.”

“!?”

“Did you think I had challenged you with no hope of succeeding, you cesspool? The magic born on earth is bound by the directions based on the earth’s magnetic field and by the density and composition of the air which is determined by air pressure which is in turn influenced by gravity. That is inevitable when you are focused on the cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west or on the basic elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. But what you will find upon leaving the atmosphere is an unknown. Coronzon, are you sure there will be no malfunction in the magic giving you control of Avatar Lola? And before, my power was bound by the puny speck named earth which failed to become a black hole or even a sun, but once we enter outer space, just how far do you think that power will be released? I do not mind at all that I will lose the support of Academy City.”

“You can’t mean…”

“Let us test it out, you cuspidor. On one side, we have you using the planet and bound to an avatar. On the other, we have me exposed and freed from the planet. Now, who will be the star of this show?”

With a deafening noise, the air was roasted.

They had finally crossed the line.

And as the atmosphere scorched everything orange, that being continued to smile.

“After all that carrying on I did, I need to follow my own rules. Yes, no matter what kind of being I am, I too must constantly work toward being happy.”

In that heavenly purgatory of extreme heat, an angel and demon beyond human understanding began to clash.

Chapter 1: A Small Light Beginning with an L – Lost_Princess.

Part 1

A simple Christmas song reached his ears.

Come to think of it, what had he been doing?

Hamazura Shiage blankly wondered that as he lay sprawled out on the ground and stared up at the sky which was changing from orange to purple. His memories were a mess. Where was he and what had he been doing? To fill in the gaps in his memory, he started by going back over what memories he still had. He had been busy all day.

To fix the infrastructure damaged in the heat wave, he had been working part-time to install and wire up ATMs around the city. He must have been influenced by Mugino's tastes because he had eaten a 580-yen salmon and roe seafood convenience store bento for lunch. The middle-aged man site manager had gotten mad at him because he ate it while sitting on a block in the parking lot. He had continued working for a while after that, but since the connections to the banks were still unstable, he had been given an envelope with the day's pay inside.

Huh? That was where it started.

Everything got a lot less clear.

(Oh, no. Was it about money? Did someone attack me from behind

with a metal pipe to swipe my pay?)

Academy City had never been as peaceful as the pamphlets claimed and some people might still be in survival mode after the heat wave. Whatever the case, he had been careless. 15,000 yen was a decent sum for a middle or high school kid.

This was going to break his spirit, so he decided to keep his thoughts positive. For example, this was better than waking up in an ice-filled trash bucket after some back-alley doctor swiped his kidney and roughly sewed him back up. Yes, he had to stay positive. Always positive.

At any rate, he tried to get up.

“Gh…?”

Something seemed slightly off as he did so.

He was wearing something. It was a lot like a motorcycle riding suit, but he could tell it was supported with electric potential elastic tape and motors. He felt over his body and then reached his face and head. He found a smooth and hard sensation there. His entire head was contained in something like a full-face helmet and a special visor covered his face. He could sense light, sound, and smells exactly the same as always, but that seemed to be handled with cameras, microphones, and the like. No, it was possible he could change modes to view gasses, electromagnetic waves, and other things beyond the human five senses.

(What the hell…?)

He spread his hands near his face to look at them. He checked the palms and then turned them around to check the back. The shiny black armor was polished like a mirror, so it reflected the cold visor. By adjusting the distance of his hands, the torso came into view

too.

It looked more solid than a riding suit.

Instead of metal, the light armor appeared to be made from some kind of petroleum product and that armor created a beautiful streamlined human figure.

The gaps in the armor were filled with a sticky-looking pale blue light. Those irregular lines of light almost looked like decorations.

He was not sure if they were LEDs or OLEDs, but the way they slowly blinked on and off suggested the brightness and color could be changed.

Something flashed in the corner of his eye and then a boxy window-like object intruded on his view. It was white text on a black background, but the alphanumeric text scrolled by far too fast for him to read.

Something bad was beginning.

That was the only interpretation.

He had not seen any kind of zipper or buttons on the suit. In fact, it seemed like an extension of his own skin, so he could not even imagine how it could be taken off. The most he could find was what felt like a small lock-like protrusion on the back of his neck. But he had felt that through the sensor-covered gloves, so it could always be a fictional sensation cooked up by messing with the data.

(What is this….?)

He had no clue.

If he had simply been attacked from behind for his day's pay, there would be no reason to put him in something like this. And this was

way too much technology for a simple prank for a joke video or something. The appearance of this kind of “secret” was a very bad omen. It suggested that this might be connected to those perverts with delusions of intelligence in the upper, upper, upper levels of the city.

And he could think of far too good a reason for them to have a grudge against him.

(This is bad. Is this about that? I so hope they haven’t learned about that.)

Whether from his breathing, heartrate, or brainwaves, the machine sensed his rising stress and displayed a yellow heart-shaped warning icon in the bottom corner of his artificial vision.

Hamazura Shiage had used glue to hide a data chip in his ear. It was less than a quarter the size of a stamp, but that tiny storage device had contained Academy City’s secret: the Parameter List. Everyone was supposed to equally receive the benefits of the powers development, but everyone’s potential was checked in advance and all the funding and equipment were focused on a small group of geniuses. In other words, there was a digital culling system that benefited only the group at the top and discarded all the other people who could have grown much further. If that got out, it could develop into a scandal that dragged a city of 2.3 million into wide-scale riots, but the power fell in his hands once he had that data. Thanks to that, Hamazura and the people he cared for were just barely able to receive peaceful lives without being targeted by the dark side.

However, that had ended with the heat wave.

That fearsome natural disaster had actually been powerful microwaves raining down from the heavens, so all exposed electronics had been mercilessly destroyed. The microchip that was

Hamazura Shiage's lifeline was no exception. He had intentionally not kept any backups to increase its value as a bargaining chip, but that had backfired.

Meaning.

Hamazura did not currently have the Parameter List as a bargaining chip.

To put it another way, the darkness of this city had no more reason to hold back. If they had learned of this, they were sure to show no mercy and attack him in his sleep. He could think of no reason why they would spare him.

This had happened just as Academy City was showing signs of recovery and thus both the light and dark sides of the city had time to focus on other things. This was suspicious. Suspicious as hell.

(This is bad, bad, bad! What is this thing!? Please don't tell me it's a sealed suit with a cylinder of poison gas attached!)

Just then…

"?"

Hamazura's mind harshly caught on something. It felt a lot like the needle suddenly skipping on a smoothly-playing record. The cause was the boxy window in the corner of his vision. As white alphanumeric text scrolled rapidly across the black background, he spotted a familiar phrase mixed in.

He did not see it clearly.

But it still stuck around in his mind like a subliminal message slipped into a film.

an-E.R.I.

"…Aneri?" he muttered before raising his voice to a shout. "What… are you installed in this thing too, like with the Dragon Rider!? If you can hear me, then answer me! …No, just give me some kind of sign. Yes…yes, I know. Stop this scrolling text for a bit! I want to get a good look at it!!"

But there was no response.

The script or registry changes must have been complete because the window closed. Only his clear vision remained. He still had no explanation for what was happening in the background.

"Aneri!!"

He shouted and stood up.

(Damn, I guess they never were the type to converse with text or voice!)

But thinking that was not going to change anything.

He frantically looked around and finally realized he was right in the middle of a major intersection. The roadside trees were decorated with LED Christmas lights and female voices were making endless announcements about sales from the department stores and appliance stores. Because Hamazura was collapsed there, traffic in every direction was stopped regardless of the light and a crowd had gathered around him at a distance. No, in this apathetic and emotionless a society, would modern boys and girls even stop on the crosswalk if someone collapsed? He had a feeling they were more likely to film it on their phones, post it to social media, and laugh their asses off.

It was clearly something else that had them cautious.

So much so that they did not even consider innocently aiming their

smartphone lenses his way to gain attention on social media.

“Moving on to the next story.”

He heard the news playing from a large exhibition screen on the belly of the airship floating in the night sky. With Christmas colors for the headline box and cutesy bells and snow rabbits hopping around, the screen composition was quite cute, but the young female announcer’s expression was frighteningly tense.

“Anti-Skill is calling for anyone from District 7 who has information on a masked man who broke into a general securities trading office this afternoon. The crime was carried out with a gun, so he is considered armed and dangerous. All nearby residents are being asked to stay home and to avoid making contact if at all possible.”

There he was.

He had made his debut.

There was grainy security camera footage and an online video in the tall aspect ratio of a cellphone. The news staff had taken the easy route and swiped other people’s work in the name of “journalism” and it all showed the masked man in question.

Now, just how many thumbs up icon “likes” would that article receive?

“Are you kidd-…that isn’t me! I don’t know what this suit is!! Aneri, please, let me wrap my head around one thing at a time!!”

He started babbling through his visor, but that only caused the crowd of people to move even further back. It must have triggered a slight domino effect because quiet shrieks rang out from the students and the part-time miniskirt Santa-chan who was selling Christmas cakes in front of a bakery. They reacted just like they

might if an escaped zoo lion had roared. None of them showed any sign of listening to his words like he was a fellow human being.

Hearing sirens and seeing an Anti-Skill armored truck approaching, Hamazura scrambled to his feet. And only after running away on reflex did he realize what he had done.

Q. If you have the misfortune of being confused for a shoplifter due to a malfunction in the sensors at the store's exit, what must you avoid doing at all costs?

"Oh, jeez. It's all over if you run, isn't it!!!???"

Part 2

This is what Silver-Haired Magic Academy Girl Aleister Crowley-tan had said.

Yes, it had begun with this.

"Hm. I would like to make some quick preparations before we get to work."

"What?"

"I would like a private space with soundproofed walls where we will not run into other customers or employees. Well, anywhere set up for karaoke should work."

That was what she had said.

To really drive home the point, she really had said that.

And now the pointy-haired idiot was faced with pink wallpaper.

Not to mention the glass-walled bath, TV embedded in the wall, and rotating bed.

"…This is wrong."

"What is?"

"Everything…just everything!! You said karaoke! So it's wrong to have a bed in the middle of the room! And it isn't right to have two boxes of tissues on the bedside table!! I mean, really!!"

Touma-chan of the Kamijou family was an adolescent boy, so he had heard rumors that places like this existed. But he had never imaged he would visit one with a historical bastard like this dirty-joke-obsessed, perverted old man who was disguised as a cute girl.

After all, one's first time held a lot of meaning. Meanwhile, this was clearly an experience best locked away in the deepest recesses of his memories. He could not let this slide just because he had a hole in his gut. He had stopped bleeding, so he would be fine.

Aleister, on the other hand, placed a hand on her slender chin with a difficult look on her face.

"You're right. We aren't here to watch a video of a lonely Santa, so we won't need that many tissues, will we? And even if we do make more of a mess than expected, there's always the bathroom. And if it comes to it, we can always lick it up to-…"

"Just shut up, you moron!! If you take it this far right from the beginning, where are we supposed to go from here!?"

The place was of course meant for viewing inappropriate videos, but it could apparently play a normal cable broadcast if you did not designate anything. It was currently playing a show that ranked the

top internet searches.

“Oh, thank goodness… These things are already near extinction and then we had that heat wave. I had thought all the retro machines were wiped out by the microwaves, but it seems some survived.”

“Why are you getting all tearful over a rotating bed!? I thought that love for retro machinery was meant for old amps and synthesizers and stuff!?”

The Windowless Building had flown away and a mysterious army was sweeping across foreign countries. Some quite shocking topics were being discussed on the flat-screen monitor, but the female announcer was still smiling cheerfully. She seemed to have mistaken the stories for fake news and joke videos on the level of Academy City’s mysterious legend of the Ultimate Galactic Turtle Robot.

Kamijou wanted to regroup with Index, Mikoto, and the others, but his cellphone was not cooperating. He first suspected the rocket’s steam explosion…but that was not the reason. Aleister the silver-haired girl (!?) exasperatedly placed her hands on her hips.

“It seems you invaded the Windowless Building not long after the microwave attack heat wave ended, but did you have enough time to buy a new phone?”

“Oh, hell. Is that disaster ever going to stop being a thorn in my side!?”

But there was nothing he could do when his phone did not work. He relied on his address book for everything, so he could not even remember the numbers of people he called on a regular basis.

“Do not grow fixated on what you can’t do. Our choices must be based in logic and efficiency.”

Meanwhile, the silver-haired girl was sitting on the fluffy round bed.

“I too would like to regroup with the other members of your group, but Coronzon’s malice will begin wriggling in the shadows before long. While we cannot make an anti-Coronzon trump card, we can make a litmus test. Let us begin by acquiring some undeniably trustworthy companions.”

“…?”

“It would be difficult to truly defeat Coronzon who is represented by the number 333. But I am only talking about creating a failure of a trump card. It will of course lose in a direct conflict, but we can use that to our advantage. In other words, if our protective charm withers and fades, we will know Coronzon’s influence has reached us.”

“But didn’t you launch that thing into space?”

“Even the moon’s gravitational pull can drive people mad. Did you really think banishing her to space would be enough to rest easy?”

The silver-haired girl accidentally hit the rotation button, so Aleister and the control panel by the pillows turned to face the other end of the room. And since it used a giant motor, it was actually quite loud. It played the kind of simple Christmas song heard all around town this time of year, but that was apparently to hide the motor noise.

“Then let’s get started. Then again, my right hand would probably destroy something like that, so I doubt there’s much I can do.”

“Not to worry. While true experts seek specialization and virginity in their Symbolic Weapons, an actual battle is a different matter. You can perform a magical ceremony with ordinary, everyday

objects. Your right hand can only destroy, but that has its upsides. When used correctly, it can function much like a monopole that only has a north pole or the powerful magnetic lines that protect a particle accelerator or fusion reactor. It is all in how you use it."

"Th-this reached a grand scale in a hurry…"

"It is the truth, but you need not be so nervous. You only need to follow my instructions."

That was likely how it worked with an expert among experts. The silver-haired girl spoke casually and did not bother donning gloves or a mask, so it felt like the sort of expertise seen when a criminal organization was preparing to modify some handguns.

"First of all, boil some water in a random container. The more the better. The temperature should only be somewhat hot, so…yes, let's make it about 37 degrees for now."

"Eh? Ah? Th-then I'll need a hot water heater…oh, and a bowl of cold water to adjust the temperature. Um, and a thermometer too…"

"Come on now. Check the bathtub panel. It lets you set the temperature of the bathwater."

Sure enough, she was right.

And at this point, none of it had anything to do with magic. Kamijou was apparently so nervous that he had fumbled over a task anyone could handle. He felt bad.

"What should I do while the water's filling up?"

"Let us prepare over here. I will close my eyes, so grab my shoulders and point me northeast. You don't know which direction that is? The room's window points south, so work it out from

there.”

“U-umm, like this?”

“Getting any extra chemicals in it could cause unexpected injuries, so I need to remove any loose materials before the synthesis experiment.”

“That would mean the cloak and the blazer…there. Um, do you not need to tie up your hair?”

“No, but the talk of hair reminds me. You might not be able to see my back well due to the hair. You can touch me, so please part my hair and focus on my back.”

“Sure.”

“You see something below the white fabric, do you not? There should be a small metal bump. Slowly and carefully undo it. Don’t worry. It will not explode.”

“This? Gulp…wait, this is your bra hook, you idiot!!!!!!”

When he shoved on her back, silver-haired Aleis-tan toppled into the center of the rotating bed. She collapsed onto her side and then faced him with quite a lot of skin showing from her disheveled white blouse, miniskirt, and kneesocks.

Kamijou Touma could not hold back any longer.

…And just to be very clear, it was nothing more than simple anger he could not hold back.

“I could tell from the color of the bra strap… You bastard!! A dirty old man shouldn’t be choosing pure white!! Why!? Are these the hopes and dreams of a dirty old man!?”

“Not to worry. The top and bottom match.”

“I can’t believe this… Now I’m always going to associate white with some old bastard!!”

“Okay, the hot water should be ready by now, but do you prefer working here?”

“Ah!? Th-that’s right. We’re actually doing serious work here. Anyway, what is it you’re trying to do? We don’t need the bath or the bed, do we? You said it was some kind of magic to create a Coronzon litmus test, right? So hurry up and reveal all that knowledge that’s bound to make my head hurt!!”

“What are you talking about? We have a boy and a girl here. And the spells with the most immediate effects have always been sex magic.”

“Bfhhh!!!???”

Kamijou really did do a spit take.

The wounds in his shoulder and side ached as he trembled and asked a question.

“Sex…magic?”

“Yes, repeating it yourself is an effective way of building comprehension. Have you more or less pictured it in your head? Now that you understand, let us begin. After all, we have no time to spare. We have a bath heated to the perfect temperature, so let us soak this bottle of slimy stuff in the bathwater to warm it up.”

“If you take one step closer, I really will punch you, dammit!!”

“That might be nice too.”

“Okay, I’ll bow down if you want, but please, anything but this!!”

Aleister was the worst no matter what they were trying to do, but Kamijou may have been somewhat lucky that even that dirty old man was turned off by legitimate tears.

The silver-haired girl looked at Kamijou the chicken, put her hands on her slender hips, and let the bed spin her around.

“…Tch. If we can’t use the union between man and woman, then this is going to be a lot more work. But fine. Earning your trust takes top priority at the moment.”

“Wh-what are you writing down in that bedside memo pad…?”

“Visit some drugstores and discount shops to gather everything on this list.”

“Um…what is all this? A siphon coffee maker, a metal bowl, a juicer, salt, and…”

“The salt is used to lower the temperature of ice. Oh, and I would assume even a hotel like this would have an icemaker, but check just to be sure. If they do not, add bagged ice to the list.”

“Okay, that and a pressure cooker, an induction cooker, and…is this number right? Just how much allergy medicine do you want me to buy?”

“That is a replacement for something that would be harder to acquire. It all comes down to synthesis and reduction.”

The round bed continued to spin.

Once she was facing him again, the young-looking board chairman continued speaking.

“Well, I suppose I have a duty to provide some basic information about Great Demon Coronzon and Anglican Archbishop Lola Stuart, but let me say one thing up front.”

She started to turn away again, so Kamijou quickly slapped the bed control button.

She must have been quite fond of it because the silver-haired girl collapsed backwards with a displeased look when the round bed stopped rotating.

“This never would have been a problem if banishing her to space with the Windowless Building was enough to end it. All I can say for certain is that Coronzon’s malice is lurking somewhere on this planet even now.”

Part 3

Just as he thought his feet had grown a bit unsteady, he began tumbling down a slope at incredible speed. That was how it felt to Hamazura Shiage.

“Dammit!!”

For some reason, the blue lines running down his arms and legs turned yellow.

Just like street racers trying to lose the police via pure speed and coming to regret it, the Anti-Skill truck in pursuit of him was not as normal as it looked. The exterior was no different from a normal truck, but it had received a considerable tuning up. There was simply no way he could escape on foot.

And yet.

As soon he took the first large step forward, the surrounding scenery was blown away and Hamazura's body jumped straight over the armored truck parting the crowd and pushing through.

"…Ah?"

Hamazura himself may have been the most shocked of all. Before his mind could catch up, his feet landed back on the ground, he balled up his body to roll across the asphalt, and he got back up and began running with the leftover momentum. This went well beyond parkour and Hamazura had no recollection of learning how to do it. The precision machinery suit he wore simply chose the actions in response to his desire to flee.

"What the-…that's way too scary! Aneri, you idiot! I can't just try this out like a new smartphone feature. You might be fine since you've mastered using this thing, but if you're not gonna give me a manual, at least give me a tutorial! Throwing me in full throttle when I don't know how to use this mass of horsepower is gonna get me killed!!"

The words "Manual Mode" flashed in the corner of his vision and he regained control of his body.

But he could not have the AI acting smug about being so obedient either.

With the squealing of tires, a mass of steel drove in from the side. The density of passersby was thinner this far away from the crosswalk, so the truck covered in bulletproof armor must have gained more freedom of movement.

Simply put, they had charged in to directly hit the dangerous criminal with their 1-ton truck's bumper.

“!?”



All moisture immediately left Hamazura's throat, but then something odd appeared in his view through the visor. In what looked like something from a dance game, colorful numbered circles appeared on the road.

They may have been an evasion pattern predicted by the machine. Unsure what was going on, Hamazura simply acted on instinct.

He rhythmically followed the steps.

The next thing he knew, he had unleashed an incredible Chinese martial arts move and the 1-ton armored truck was flying through the air.

"……
……Huh?"

He sat there in the move's follow through pose and watched the mass of bulletproof armor roll away like an empty tissue box. The lights filling the gaps in the creepy suit's armor changed from yellow back to blue.

"A-Aneri-san?"

It was true he was wearing a strange suit. It was also true its specs were an unknown. But even with (presumably) Aneri guiding him through the optimum movements, could he really do that? A speeding 1-ton truck had slammed into a human and it was the truck that was sent flying. When had he become a sage cloistered deep in the mountains?

"Aneri-saaaan!!!???"

With their armored truck utterly defeated, it seemed Anti-Skill was hesitant to approach without a plan. They stopped their trucks at a distance and used the vehicles and their doors as shields as they

aimed guns his way.

He shuddered.

But not at Anti-Skill's rational response. Lines of fire and step markers were nonchalantly displayed in his vision. If this was all it took, then he was not even playing on very easy; this was the tutorial level.

After what he had done to the 1-ton bulletproof truck, he was sure to kill a flesh-and-blood opponent if he inputted the command.

"Dammit…!!"

Hamazura ignored all the round markers on the ground, broke through the fear to forcibly tear his feet from the ground, and ran for a nearby alley entrance. At first, a red "unrecommended action" warning icon flashed, but Aneri must have done something again because new step marker appeared, these ones leading to the alley. The light in the gaps of the armor changed from blue to yellow. Simply by placing his feet in the designated spots like he was entering a combo command as simple as PPKPK, he pulled off some irregular actions that easily avoided the full-auto fire that was fired from multiple directions without any kind of warning.

Then he dashed right into the alley.

It actually frightened him more that not even a single shot grazed him.

(If I don't do something, Aneri's going to take this beyond the point of no return. At this rate, it'll be kill or be killed, and I don't want either! I don't want to get caught up in this, but I'm not going along with it either. Heroically causing a scene and getting arrested for it won't help anything!!)

As he ran further, he obeyed the marker icons that appeared along the narrow alley and knocked over abandoned bicycles, large trash cans, and such. Like an accident at a marathon water station, the obstacles stopped his pursuers with the utmost accuracy and efficiency, but there was only one thing in the boy's head.

He needed a reliable goddess and he only knew three people who fit the bill.

Although some of them were well on their way to being gods of destruction.

(Mugino, Kinuhata…and Takitsubo! They're clever, so I can meet up with them and ask them what to do!!)

Part 4

"I see."

As the sky changed from purple to the full black of night, a white-haired red-eyed monster stood on the edge of a skyscraper roof.

"Vector control, hm? Come to think of it, that building's nuke-resistant armor also used manmade tech to incorporate a part of that, didn't it?"

Part 5

"Um, how do I use this thing?"

Because he was entirely covered in a skintight suit with no apparent pockets, Hamazura Shiage could not even pull out his usual cellphone. Thus, he was forced to stick his hand underneath some vending machines. The soda machines for major beverage companies all used IC cards, so no one used coins for them, but these were mid and small sized machines for bread and sports newspapers. Once he had some change, he searched around and found a public phone booth pretty easily. The latest models apparently had high-speed internet jacks as well, but he had never seen anyone with a cable hooked up to one.

The booth's stainless steel frame was surprisingly shiny and the glass seemed to have been polished too. It was possible it had been newly installed after the heat wave, just like the ATMs that Hamazura had been helping with. The city's fire hydrants and sprinklers were similar.

"This thing's just in the way."

He was not used to using a receiver that had a coiled cord, so he tugged and stretched it with his empty hand.

(Um, do you put the change in here? Do you pick up the receiver and then put the change in, or do you put the change in first? Huh? If you pick it up before putting any money in, who pays for the time spent playing that tone???)

Trying it out what his only option. And only after putting a coin in and then lifting the receiver did he realize he could not think of a single phone number because he always used his phone's address book. The simple electronic tone coming from the receiver only made his heart pound faster. As panic and tension sent his head spinning, a revolution occurred in his head. An 11-digit number popped into his mind.

"Ah! Whose number is this again? Hanzou's maybe? Well, anyone's

fine at the moment!!”

His mechanical fingertips raced across the push buttons. All it did was display the dialed number, but the small screen was in full color for some reason.

Finally, the familiar ringing sound came from the receiver. He also saw a super-deformed pixel art version of a Brother Santa and a Queen Reindeer chasing each other around near the display for the amount paid.

Hamazura waited while listening to the receiver’s speaker through his helmet’s microphone, which felt like something out of Hollywood to him.

“Arrrgh, not another bearded old geezer!! How many more times do I have to beat the Thousand Dragon before I get that season-limited Santa miniskirt!?”

“Hanzou-shi, this is a trading event where you are meant to swap presents for Christmas, so I don’t think you will ever get that drop if you keep using female characters.”

“And what is with all that ringing? I can’t focus. Kuruwa, turn off my phone!”

“Those are the bells on the screen, aren’t they? I thought it might be the front door’s intercom, but there was no one there. Then I thought it might be a firetruck passing by, but I checked out the window and didn’t see anything.”

“Okay, I’m not going to give up! Our youth is counting on this!!”

“I was wondering why you said you needed a computer in a hurry, but I didn’t expect it to be simple internet withdrawal symptoms…

Uuh, that ringing just won't go away. It's going to make me neurotic…"

After the phone rang on and on like an infinite loop, Hamazura ran out of patience.

"He's not answering!! What is that idiot doing!?"

He just about slammed the receiver back onto the hook, but he would probably break the payphone if he did that with his weird suit's strength. He took some deep breaths to keep his cool, began thrashing about in the cramped box when Aneri displayed a bad breath warning, and prepared for his next attempt.

When he placed the receiver on the hook, the Brother Santa made a last second roll to just barely escape a charge from the Queen Reindeer on the small screen.

He heard the clinking of change falling into the return slot.

He did not have an unlimited number of attempts. Once this change was gone, he was out of luck.

(Hmm, hmm…ah!? Takoyaki-wan-nyan, that's it!! That's Takitsubo's number!!)

He recalled a goroawase mnemonic that would be no help at all on an entrance exam.

This was probably his last chance.

That meant it was all up to those cuties.

He would summon a full deck of those shiny SSR Level 4 and Level 5 cards.

(What does a call from a payphone look like on the other end? Will she pick up if it doesn't give a number? Please don't let that happen! This is my last coin!)

The call went through while he was thinking.

"…Um, who is it?"

"Me, me. It's me. Hey, hey, you recognize my voice, right!?"

"…"

He had already completely forgotten that the usual number would not show up on her phone.

Hamazura frantically pieced together the right words in his mind.

"Takitsubo, it's me. Hamazura Shiage. The pressure from you treating me like a stranger is about to crush my stomach, so could you ease up a bit?"

"This hopeless behavior… I guess it really is Hamazura. What is it?"

How she confirmed his identity made him feel like he was carrying a bomb in his stomach.

At any rate, he was lucky he had been able to contact her at all. Until now, he had not found anyone – not even Aneri – who he could speak with. This was enough to make him feel a little emotional, so he began gesturing as he explained his situation.

"Hey, like I said this morning, I was helping install an ATM at the supermarket, but after I was given an envelope with the day's pay, someone attacked me from behind, or that's what I thought, but now I'm not so sure since I'm inside some high-tech suit and Aneri won't say anything, oh, and Aneri is apparently installed in this suit, but I'm not sure about that either since they aren't acting normal

and then Anti-Skill showed up and the news said I'm a wanted criminal, but I'm not, I'm not at all, because I didn't do it and it was just the suit, so there must be someone else in the same suit and I'm just getting blamed for their crimes, so I ended up running away and what am I even supposed to do now?"

"Could you sum that up for me???"

Unfortunately, the idiot's vocabulary was hopelessly insufficient. His explanation was a lost cause from the moment he shifted freely up and down the timeline, mixed his personal predictions and the objective facts together, and used gestures despite talking over the phone.

And this was a payphone.

Something was flashing on the small LCD screen. The call was apparently about to end.

"Ah, ahh!! It's ending, the call's going to end!!"

"Hamazura, why are you calling from a public phone anyway? What happened to your cellphone?"

Oh, so it shows up as "Public Phone" on the other end, he realized even though that did not help his situation in the slightest.

"A-anyway, the one thing I know is that I'm in some real trouble. The call's time limit is approaching fast, so I want to decide on a place to meet up!"

"??? Can't you just come home?"

He might be pursued by Anti-Skill, the city's higher ups, the dark side, the shadow emperor, or the queen of the night, so he was afraid to head straight home and lead the enemy there. But that was a secret.

“Okay, fine then! Seven tonight! At seven tonight, go to the turtle statue in front of District 7’s southern station! We can meet-…!!”

With a sudden click and a dial tone, the Brother Santa that had been so desperately fleeing across the screen was finally unable to avoid the Queen Reindeer’s charge, was caught, and exploded. His time was up. He could no longer hear that familiar voice.

He thought his instructions had gotten through to her, but he was a little uneasy.

“…”

Hoping harder was not going to change anything, but he still stared intently at the silent receiver.

(A-anyway, I have my next objective. I need to meet up with Takitsubo and the others. I’m not stuck yet; I have an actual goal. Mugino or Kinuhata might be able to tear apart this weird suit’s fibers and get me out of here. A-and since I was just about killed for a crime I didn’t commit, surely Anti-Skill will accept what I did was justified self-defense if I explain my circumstances, right?)

Just then, red light shined on every surface of the phone booth around him. It came from the strange suit he was wearing.

Red was the color of death. This was the greatest warning.

The clear phone booth made of reinforced glass was sliced diagonally down the center.

That human bisection magic trick (which was real and had nothing up its sleeve) caused the glass to shatter a moment later.

Something frightening had passed through.

Just after Hamazura barely managed to sense it, his artificial vision

had filled with countless red warning windows. His entire vision had flipped around and he had felt a powerful impact to the center of his chest. And then a few colorful markers had appeared overlaid on his vision.

“…!!”

While still upside down, he placed his palms on the ground to continue a flip and get his feet on the ground once more.

“Heh. That pathetic response makes me doubt you’re the rumored A. O. Francisca.”

Only then did Hamazura realize what had happened.

“But if you’re wearing a Processor Suit, I guess it’s the same either way. This shouldn’t be boring at least. So does this mean you’re the parent?”

It was a person.

Some kind of white shadow was speaking human language.

(A vacuum blade? No, was it just the stiletto effect??? Did they gather the weight or other vectors into a razor-thin blade and send that toward me?)

Of course, he could not work out such a clear explanation of an invisible and silent attack after seeing it just the once. As the warning windows closed like a receding wave, all sorts of data from different lenses and sensors appeared in their place. Just like revealing the trick behind a piece of stage magic that used magnets, he was instantly given all the details on a paranormal phenomenon wrapped in the veil of the mystical. Enough so that even a dumb delinquent could make an accurate prediction.

An unpleasant chill ran down his spine.

Data was like a series of dots and it took human senses to connect those dots together and find the answer.

But finding the right answer did not necessarily put one's mind at ease.

The correct answer here was vector control.

Which meant…

"A…"

"Ahn?"

"Accelerator!!!???"

Shouting the name changed nothing.

His opponent was perhaps the most well-known person in Academy City. Knowing his name was not going to tell him this was an acquaintance of his. …And even if they had met a few times like in Russia and Hawaii, Accelerator had not seemed like the type to make friends.

So Hamazura was not given a chance to explain.

"So that's the same Calculate Fortress as the Windowless Building, huh?"

By the time Hamazura heard that whisper, his opponent had already slipped right up to him.

He moved faster than Aneri's warning messages could appear.

"Let's see how well this thing can reproduce my powers. That should be fun!!!!!!"

He flew.

He was knocked away.

With just a swing of Accelerator's right hand, Hamazura was freed from the bonds of gravity and broke through a water storage tank on the roof of a nearby building. All the stored water turned to spray and splashed across the area. In a detached sort of way, he noted that it looked like an effect from a fighting game.

While his body continued to rotate, his eyes grew unfocused and it all felt surreal. But not because he was passing out after receiving the full brunt of an attack from Academy City's #1.

Quite the opposite.

The red in the gaps of his armor and returned to yellow.

"Are you kidding…? I took an attack from the #1 and I'm still alive!?"

Markers flashed to indicated predicted landing points on building rooftops, emergency stairs, and the asphalt on the ground. Apparently the height did not matter. Hamazura twisted his body as guided to shift his center of gravity, change his midair orientation, plant his feet on a building wall, counteract the impact, and drop to the ground like a basketball falling into the hoop.

(A. O. Francisca…)

Hamazura thought about that name after easily landing from such a height.

That was an important piece of information.

(That has to refer to a person. But it isn't me. So is it the name or something of the real wanted criminal? Ay oh? Whatever the case,

he must know more than me.)

He had fallen into a back alley somewhere.

The gaps in the processor suit's armor kept changing between yellow and blue.

He did not know if it had happened during the heat wave or before, but there was a shiny abandoned car with all four tires, all four doors, the seats, the engine, the muffler, and even the steering wheel removed. There was also a pried-open drink vending machine, a small safe, and some other things lying around in a pile. This seemed to be a dismantling zone or dumping ground for a thief group.

Hamazura could hardly believe himself when this odd scene felt almost nostalgic to him, but then several markers appeared in his mechanically-enhanced vision. He did not know if they were to let him run away or to fight, but Aneri was telling him to keep going. He could not just give up even if he was up against Accelerator. The machine was telling him he had a chance.

Just how arrogant could he be?

But Hamazura definitely felt the uncontrollable fear in his chest beginning to fade a bit. This was the same as grabbing a weapon to feel at ease. Or like grabbing a cursed sword.

He was not standing up to his opponent because he was strong and brave.

He was letting himself be guided in that direction because he was weak and wanted to escape this pressure.

(I can't believe this… I just can't seem to look good no matter what I do.)

He shook his head in self-deprecation and sat on the trunk of the polished but abandoned car. It had no door or windows, but it seemed to have been a luxury car originally. He wanted to forcibly calm down his legs that threatened to excitedly take him back to the battle scene.

…It was pathetic, but not wrong.

He would be lying if he said he had never wished to be a hero. He had wished he had the power to punch out anyone, even Academy City's #1. But where would that lead? The more he sought that thrill and the more he was useful or a saving force in a disaster, the more obvious it would be that he was surrounded by nothing but an all-encompassing conflagration.

Happiness was boring. And that was good enough for him.

Just as he was managing to tear that strange temptation from his heart, his machine-enhanced senses picked up on something.

…Gyahh…

At first, he thought it was a bird or something. Maybe a crow or another large bird that had learned to survive in the city. It felt like an ill omen to him.

Still seated on the abandoned car's trunk, he looked around to find the source of the noise. Birds like that were known to attack people (although it was rarely unprovoked). And as someone who had once used the back alleys as a home base, he could not laugh off something like that. Just like rats or roaches, they were more frightening as a carrier of disease than for any simple wound they could cause.

But he saw nothing to the front, back, left, or right.

…Gyahh, oh…

But the impression you had of the information provided by your senses could be greatly changed by an assumption in your mind. Something about this seemed odd for an animal cry. He did not immediately think about “eliminating” it because he sensed something in the cry that stimulated a protective desire. It seemed to be pleading him or asking for help.

And he finally realized something.

(If it isn’t to the front, back, left, or right, then is it up or d-..)

Still sitting on the car’s trunk, Hamazura slowly lowered his gaze. He once more focused on the object he was placing his weight on.

Just like realizing how to look at a piece of trick artwork, understanding spread to all of his senses.

Ogyahh.

“……
……Is this some kind of joke?”

He lifted his hips.

Looking a bit like he was miming sitting in a chair, Hamazura saw the instant when the shiny abandoned car “changed”. It was a sinister “change” to the atmosphere or aura surrounding it, so it was nothing visible, audible, or otherwise detectible through the suit’s lenses or sensors.

This was not an animal cry.

It sounded like a baby was crying from the abandoned car’s trunk.

“Dammit!!”

He grabbed the trunk with both hands, but it of course did not budge. This was a new car that had been stripped for parts, so rust or bent parts would not be to blame. It was locked. Had the owner done this, or had someone placed “something” inside and shut the trunk to let the autolock do its thing? If what he thought was going on here was correct, then the situation was horrific either way.

(I suppose it could be a cat or a dog, right? No, that would be bad too. Oh, I know! It could be a toy doll that plays back this sound!)

Because he did not want to accept the truth, he came up with a second and third possibility that even he knew were improbable. Heartrate, breathing, and perspiration warnings appeared in the corner of his vision. Yes, if that was all this was, the panic and tension would not be messing with his organs so much.

With his hands still on the shiny metal trunk, Hamazura shook his head without thinking. He was in a narrow back alley. He was not going to conveniently run across some convenient adult like Cinderella’s fairy godmother.

He could still hear the crying voice through the thick metal.

It was time for action. If he did not do it, no one would.

“Why in the hell is any of this happening!?”

He cursed and focused his mind.

He could feel his knowledge and skills from his Skill Out days passing from deep in his mind to his fingertips.

The trunk was solid and modern cars often used both an analog lock and an electronic lock. But the only real threat was the alarm and drive recorder, so knowledge of the lock’s internal structure was irrelevant if you only needed to pry it open. Just like a house’s

front door or a desk drawer, it only had the one deadbolt.

(I could use a drill or some acid in the keyhole. No, there's a simpler solution. Leverage should do the trick!)

His eyes raced across the alley's filthy ground. This was a dismantling zone or dumping ground for a thief group, so there were piles with the remains of vending machines, small safes, and the like. He grabbed a metal pipe from the ground, used the weight of a boxy safe to crush the pipe's end down flat, stuck it into the gap between the trunk door and the chassis, and placed the sole of his foot on the pipe. When he pressed his weight down on it, the leverage forced apart the lock's latch.

With a dull snap, the trunk popped up.

The battery and the alarm itself may have been taken away with everything else because his ears were not assaulted by the shrill noise.

A deep darkness lurked within.

No, the trunk was just a trunk. It took some time for Hamazura himself to sense that raw malice.

A small form was wrapped in soft baby clothes.

It almost looked like a bagworm made from white cloth.

This life was so young that he could not tell at a glance whether they were a boy or a girl.

…Hamazura Shiage had never lived a commendable life. He knew all about the hidden side of this city of children and there were plenty of things people could not let come to light. So he had heard of things like this happening.

But the trunk of an abandoned car in a highly unhygienic back alley was too much.

Leaving them outside in December with no water, air, or food was the same as indirect murder.

“This is insane. Mold and ticks are enough of a threat on their own…”

He spoke it all aloud because this was an unfamiliar problem for him and because he just felt that overwhelmed. He was afraid to keep this inside.

And worst of all…

No matter how heroically he raged at the unfair world and picked up the baby after performing a Caesarian section on this metal womb, it was Hamazura himself who would be bringing the greatest direct threat to the child. What if the #1 showed up now? What if Anti-Skill surrounded him to gun him down with next-generation weapons? A single shot would snuff out this budding life. No matter how much they said they did not know and had not meant to, the result would remain unchanged.

(What do I do? What am I supposed to do?)

There was no time.

Not for Hamazura and especially not for this fragile life.

(I can’t leave them here. And allowing a stray shot to hit them is out of the question. But I’m wanted for a crime I didn’t commit, so who knows if I can safely get them to an Anti-Skill station or hospital. And if I have to rely on those acrobatic movements in another battle, I’ll end up with the same problem as someone who shook their baby.)

He was more or less surrounded and there were very few people he could rely on.

But at the same time, that made it easy to narrow down the options available to him.

(Luckily, I'm the only they're after. …So it would probably best to leave the baby with Takitsubo and the others and have them take the child to an Anti-Skill station or hospital.)

He would not have to worry after handing the baby over.

The baby and Takitsubo's group were not targets here. If he went elsewhere after handing off the child, they could walk freely through Academy City as normal, non-threatened people and get the baby to safety.

…Hamazura honestly wanted to stick around and make sure the baby was safe, but he partially gave up on that idea as hopeless. He did not want to become the kind of person who spoke to the child in baby talk to feel that protective desire.

He had no idea how to pick up a baby, but Aneri was actually obedient this time. He followed the instructions on the screen and picked the child up. The guide arrows seemed to be telling him to gently rub their back. Whether they understood the situation or not, the baby uttered some happy-sounding syllables. The psychology of children at this age was far outside his area of expertise. Despite the frigid air, the baby innocently reached out their arms and tried to touch his visor. They had become a bundle of curiosity.

"?"

Just then, he saw something wrapped around the baby's wrist. It was a colorful tag, possibly made of plastic.

And something was written there.

“Ell.”

He read off the letters on the tag wrapped around their wrist.

“L…I…L…I…T…H.”

He tilted his head.

If this was their real name, then was the child a foreign girl like Fremea? Well, it was also sadly possible that this was an extremely unconventional name choice and she would grow up to be a pure Japanese black-haired beauty.

At any rate, Hamazura muttered the name to himself.

“…Lilith???”

Part 6

“Nn…”

Mina Mathers, a woman in black mourning clothes, cat ears, and a cat tail, stood tall and raised her newly-bound original grimoire above her head in a corner of Academy City after night had fallen.

She had already walked around the “outside world” for a bit in order to make up for the discrepancies introduced by her physical body – things like gravitational calculations, air resistance, and maintaining her balance on two legs – but she was still a little surprised by how real her own physical voice sounded.

Everything she felt through her skin was new to her, so her seemingly decorative cat ears turned this way and that and the end of her tail rose up as a physical object and not just an illusion. Needless to say, it was the same reaction as a curious cat.

Her feet were placed on the ground.

With that solid sensation below her, the black cat witch looked up into the night sky, but with the vortex of Christmas lights making it hard to see the normal stars, she could not hope to see the Windowless Building which had left the atmosphere. The people's strong wills had helped the city recover enough to wipe away the darkness of the night and the natural view had once more been irresponsibly destroyed.

Many simple Christmas songs overlapped in the streets as Mina breathed a white breath. Yes, she was now both bound and supported by things like air and gravity.

(Now, then.)

Now that she was freed from the bonds of the largescale parallel processing machine, nothing forced Mina to do anything. But at the same time, the being who had given her this original grimoire had also left her a message to relay. She would have felt awkward not repaying this debt, so she did have one guide for her actions.

(That should be enough basic movement testing, so I suppose I should start searching for the whereabouts of Administrator Aleister. To be honest, I doubt that will be the end of Coronzon.)

She could have rid herself of Aleister Crowley and everything related to him by leaving Academy City, but Mina was oddly uninterested in doing so. She felt a stronger urge to remain in Academy City.

She was no longer a precision computer.

She stopped analyzing the cause behind this phenomenon and instead resumed her willful action.

She had a single overall objective, but she was distracted by every little thing along the way. Just like a cat. She observed the plump miniskirt Santa part-timer taking Christmas cake preorders in front of a convenience store, she had a staring contest with the white cat walking atop a fence, she stuck her hand into the gap between vending machines, and she pressed her hands against the glass window of what seemed to be a gym so she could look inside.

(I see, I see. This seems to be more about martial arts than general fitness. Although I cannot quite tell whether this is supposed to be boxing, kickboxing, or wrestling.)

The black cat witch was apparently unfamiliar with mixed martial arts. That would be because she had no interest in the sweat and muscles of macho men.

Then why had she stopped in front of this gym from which she heard intermittent dull sounds of impact?

(A punch…)

She remembered that attack that had knocked down Administrator Aleister.

Mina Mathers clenched and unclenched her own slender hand.

(That’s right. If I am no longer obligated to obey anyone, then I could do that too. Drool.)

Just then…

“Hwohhh! Hwohhhh! Hey, why’s she shoving her boobs up against

the glass!?" "A lady…no, a widow is staring passionately at us and drooling!!" "Finally… Our pursuit of muscles had cost us any hope of a merry Christmas, but our final chance has arrived!!"

As the people inside began shouting, getting all heated up, and showing off their kneecaps or thigh muscles (because no matter how stoically they claimed it was for self-improvement, they really just wanted to be popular), Mina ignored them all and turned in a different direction.

She heard a baby's happy voice.

A mysterious figure in a full-face helmet and something like a riding suit was trying to sneak off with a baby.

(Could that be…? No, surely not…)

But Mina Mathers's sense of danger came from elsewhere.

"Whoops."

She took one step away from the gym window.

That was all it took for someone else to swiftly react.

They had white hair and red eyes.

"Who do you think you are targeting with that dangerous look in your eyes?" she asked.

"I already know the answer, but fine, I'll ask: You intentionally got in my way, didn't you? I doubt this was just some hopelessly bad luck."

"Well, I am no longer obligated to obey anyone. So if you must have an answer, let me say I was acting of my own free will."

When Mina smoothly responded, a palette knife had already appeared in her hand like a magic trick.

Her weapon was art.

“Whether you mean harm or not, the murderous look you were giving that riding suit is enough for me. The two of you are free to battle if you wish, but I will make sure you choose a time and a location that will not bring harm to the baby with him.”

“I don’t really care.”

By the time he said that, it was already over.

He flicked a few of the leaves falling from the roadside trees and they sliced through the air to attack her like razor blades. No, that monster was never actually looking at the black cat witch. He was directly targeting the riding suit holding the baby and she was just in the way.

More and more sparks flew.

All on its own, Mina Mathers’s palette knife moved faster than her own eyes could keep up and it struck down the leaf bullets one after another.

(I see. So this is the vector control I’ve heard so much about.)

But she could not fully counteract the impact.

The black cat witch stiffened slightly and the #1 did not even need to approach her. Since he could manipulate all vectors as he saw fit, he could control the flow of air…that is, the wind. If he created a small tornado around himself, he could lift as many leaves as he wanted from the ground. He could give himself a supply of 100, 1000, or even more bullets to gradually wear Mina Mathers down until she was dead.

The lady in mourning clothes and cat ears once more raised her palette knife in the standard fashion.

“No, I suppose I have no more reason to follow the standard.”

She readily let go of her greatest weapon.

Gravity pulled on the metal and its tip touched the sidewalk.

At that very moment, she became a wind colored the black of mourning and moved right up to Accelerator.

Mina Mathers was “something shaped the same as a person”. She was actually a grimoire, so she was not a human or even a mammal. Thus, her skeleton, muscles, and various organs did not need to move in the normal fashion.

And that meant she could entirely ignore the upper limits of the human body which was bound by calcium and protein.

By the time Accelerator saw her, he could already feel the pressure of the tightly clenched fist striking his entire face. The strength of the word “reflection” was entirely blown away.

It had not functioned at all.

The black cat witch’s right hook caught the #1’s cheekbone and she continued swinging with her entire body weight behind it. The great roar of impact only arrived after a short delay. When she saw the slender form quickly spin around, Mina Mathers whispered to him.

“Even the #1’s reflection is reliant on the calculations you use to control that power. Simply put, you cannot control any vectors with which your conscious and unconscious calculations cannot keep up. Of course, with the brain of Academy City’s #1 and the Misaka Network at your disposal, that would not normally present any kind

of problem. …Yes, unless you began a benchmark test with a true processing device. And even if I have been freed from the bonds of that largescale parallel processing device, I am still doing the Thoth Tarot.”

“Ah…bwah…!?”

“Hm. I thought I had understood the gravitational calculations, but combat movements feel different. With a physical body, my breasts are a lot heavier and in-the-way than I had expected. But it’s neat how the swinging of the tail helps recover my balance after the follow-through for the punch. Now get up. There is so much more I wish to try out.” The black cat witch took some quick steps back and forth while clenching her fist again.

It did not fit.

This behavior did not fit Mina Mathers’s manner of speech at all.

But that was exactly why the stimulation-starved widow’s lips formed a clear sign of joy behind her veil.

“No matter how old I get, my first time doing something is always so fascinating.”

Part 7

He was holding a baby, so he had to avoid any intense movements.

The 7:00 meetup time was approaching fast.

Hamazura got moving with the Processor Suit trailing blue light.

The turtle statue in front of the station was an unfortunate place that had originally been a good place to designate as a meetup point, but its image had rapidly declined when it was frequently used for handing off sketchy items sold at online auctions and by school uniform girls who never seemed to return to their dorm. It was located outside an exit with no stores, so almost no one went there. It did not even have the bare minimum of Christmas lights. The turtle itself also had a variety of legends about it, like that it shot beams from its eyes at night, that it leaned on girls who had run away from home to drive them away from whoever they were meeting there, or that it combined with the top of District 18's domed stadium to transform into the Ultimate Galactic Turtle Robot (hot-blooded). For such an eerie statue, the legends about it were oddly justice-oriented.

"There, there. Some nice girls should be here soon to take you somewhere warm, so try to bear with the cold until then."

The baby responded with an innocent voice. She probably had not understood him.

He had considered the possibility of heavily-armed Anti-Skill officers locking onto him the instant he left the back alley, but when he hesitantly stepped out, no one really reacted. And this was apparently more than just modern kids not caring about others.

Having a baby with him seemed to eliminate any suspicion that he might be dangerous.

This was an impression warned about in textbooks for training VIP bodyguards. They would work to fill the gap by not letting their guard down even around someone pushing a stroller or holding a baby.

"Now I'm not sure who's saving who."

Hamazura passed by a part-timer in a snowman costume (probably advertising toy sales at an home appliance store) and held the happily laughing baby as he walked through the night roads which were even more dangerous than normal. What he first thought was a Christmas song turned out to be a Christmas mix of an electronics store's jingle. Their top products seemed to be gyro-equipped VR goggles and an action game where you controlled a small boy to manipulate Waltraute, fourth of the nine Valkyrie sisters.

It felt like a miracle that he arrived safely at the turtle statue. On his own, he would have caused another major panic and more Hollywood action would have begun.

The copper statue sat atop a fake-looking stone pedestal made to look like marble.

The surface had yet to rust, so the turtle statue actually looked kind of unnatural. And there was already someone in front of it.

"…I'm receiving a signal from north-northwest…"

It was an absentminded girl with a blank look in her eyes and glossy black hair cut to shoulder length. She also had fairly large breasts (←Important). Setting aside the confusing stuff about AIM Stalker and the Academy Individual, she was the person he knew as Takitsubo Rikou. Perhaps to emulate the Kasa Jizou story, she had wrapped her scarf around the neck of the turtle statue no one else even looked at.

He checked the time and found it was exactly 7.

The worst possibility would have been to wait around when someone might be pursuing him and ultimately have the girls never show, but it seemed he did not have to worry about that.

But Hamazura's thoughts were elsewhere.

He found something entirely unexpected waiting for him.

That girl supposedly wore a pink track suit year-round, but now she had transformed into once-a-year fluffy red and white Santa (miniskirt, midriff-baring, kneesock-equipped, and green-ribbon-like-rubber-suspenders-to-accentuate-the-chest edition)!!

“Ehh? Um, wh-what are you doing, Takitsubo-san!? When did you start getting into the Christmas spirit!?”

“Hamazu-…”

…She stopped calling his name partway through.

That normally otherworldly and absentminded girl gave Hamazura a skeptical look.

Or more specifically, she looked between the mysterious Processor Suit’s helmet and the baby he held.

“What is that?”

“No, wait! It’s me!”

“Me as in…a pervert?”

“It’s Hamazura!! I don’t know what the baby’s deal is either, but I couldn’t just leave her in that abandoned car’s trunk!! And I called you earlier, didn’t I!? Why are we losing progress here!?”

“I can’t see your face and your voice sounds digitally altered… You aren’t Hamazura, so I went out of my way to wear this and all I get is some weirdo staring at me… And that suit is so bizarre that the weirdo is gathering more attention…”

Oh, no, thought Hamazura as he started to panic. A dark aura surrounded her. The fact that she could not see him over the phone

had worked in his favor, but now that she could see him, she was starting to doubt his story. He was on the verge of failing in his primary objective to hand off Lilith so she could be taken to safety while he kept his distance.

Just like someone caught by a malfunctioning shoplifting alarm, his frantic actions only made him look more suspicious as he tried to plead his case. In all seriousness, if he could not leave Lilith with her, the baby's life might really be at risk!

"Let's get back to the basics. It's the same as a family's sign to prevent scammers from impersonating them. What do I need to tell you? What can I tell you to convince you I'm really me?"

"Hmm?" Takitsubo tilted her head. "Then tell me something only Hamazura and I would know."

You got it.

"That's easy, silly. You don't wear a bra when you sleep. Humans spend a third to a fourth of their lives sleeping, so I keep telling you I'm worried about future sagging if you don't at least put on a fluffy soft bra or a sports bra! Stop being so lazy about your boobs!!"

He did exactly as he was told and yet he got a silent punch to the visor for his trouble.

And Aneri faithfully displayed a marker for where to place his hands and feet for the recommended counterattack, but he entirely ignored that.

"……Is there a filthy camera hidden in my bedroom?"

"Wait, wait, this'll never end like that! Say that and you can't trust

the family sign. What's next? A chip in the brain? Or did I ask the ancestor clinging to your back? If we have to address all of those eccentric possibilities, we'll have to start thinking about the possibility of a galactic war!!"

"Hmm?"

Takitsubo simply gave a puzzled groan. She did not seem nearly eager enough. But since she did not stop listening and scream for help, she must have been conflicted. And that meant she was considering the possibility he was telling the truth.

Hamazura could not let this grow into a roleplaying session about a galactic war or a parallel world. What was he lacking? The academic city delinquent worked his brain cells to the limit and decided to settle it once and for all.

"Okay, okay. Then I'll go with that. Takitsubo, you hate hanging your underwear out to dry where people can see them, so you always use a dryer for them. You've been worried about belly fat recently, so you secretly do 50 nude sit-ups in the changing room every day after your bath. No, you aim to do 50, but you usually give up after 20 or 30. I always hear the shower run twice every day because you only realize after the fact that you've worked up a sweat right after taking a bath. But for some reason, you've decided that every Friday is white panties day. Since I know all that, surely you have to believe it's really me! Right!?"

"Why do you know so many things the real Hamazura doesn't know!?"

"Don't worry. I know you stand in front of the mirror worriedly lifting up your boobs every day, but you aren't going to get sweat rash below those large breasts so easily. I know you take off your bra every night because you're afraid of sweat building up, but you don't really need to worry about ventilation at this stage."

“Ah, ah, ahhhh!? What is this!? What’s going on!? Are there cameras all over my room broadcasting everything 24 hours a day!!!???”

Oh, I guess I got a little too heated up, realized Gentleman Hamazura.

And if that absentminded girl thought that little bit of effort was enough to hide her maiden’s worries, then she was greatly underestimating what it meant to live with someone. You might think your roommate was not watching, but they were.

Anyway, the miniskirt Santa girl (1LDK, midriff, green ribbons, and kneesocks) was bristling, blushing, and curled up with her head in her hands, but he did not have time for her to recover.

More importantly, some other people arrived.

“Huh? I get the feeling this isn’t a shopping trip to the convenience store, so super what are you doing out here, Takitsubo-san???”

“…And I don’t like the looks of that guy messing with her.”

It was Level 4 Offense Armor, Kinuhata Saiai, and Level 5 Meltdowner, Mugino Shizuri.

The short girl with brown hair in a round bob wore a white knit dress that left her bare legs exposed to a risqué extent. The sexy girl with her wavy chestnut hair worn long had her impressive silhouette boldly visible even through her thick coat. …No one would have expected that beautiful body was half covered in old scars and burns and used a prosthetic hand and eye.

The place and time mattered a lot, but Academy City was not as safe as they claimed. If these two were walking around the dangerous night dressed like that, they had to have enough power

to protect themselves.

At this point, even an academic failure like Hamazura had figured out the rules. He would not be given time to calmly explain himself.

And on top of that…

(If I stay silent and leave the baby here, will they actually take her in? That's the real question.)


麦野沈利
予測：ケダモノ－01
絹旗最愛
予測：ケダモノ－02
滝壺理后
測：テンネン－01

The girls of former Item had to be focusing their hostility on Suspicious Individual: Maskman. If he left Lilith, he should not have to worry about her getting caught in the middle of it.

With that in mind, Hamazura saw Aneri place guide labels over parts of the scenery.

Mugino Shizuri (←Prediction: Animal 01).

Kinuhata Saiai (←Prediction: Animal 02).

Takitsubo Rikou (←Prediction: Airhead 01).

The Processor Suit's light changed from blue to yellow.

And as a finishing blow, the baby in his arms clumsily but innocently spoke some words.

Hag, flat, gentle.

"Okay, yeah. She's not safe with them."

No matter what they looked like, those reprehensible people permeated by the dark side showed no mercy.

The warning light coloring Hamazura's body changed from yellow to red.

Blinding beams and iron fists of invisible air flew about while Hamazura took evasive action with Lilith in his arms.

"Aneri, some support please! Focus on the center of the blows!!"

A single shake could do serious damage to a baby's head, so performing midair flips with her would be too dangerous. But if he made sure Lilith was always at the center of his axis of rotation, he could move around all he liked while restricting the centrifugal

force to a minimum. He looked like he was pantomiming a struggle to pull on a bag stuck in midair.

He also had a chance at negating the impact of landing.

If a pro baseball player was hit by a pitch, they could break a bone, but striking the same impact with a bat would not break their wrists. The ball, the bat, and their wrists were physically linked, but the impact would not propagate along them if the conditions were right. There would be some margin of error, but he could theoretically counteract the vector to the point of reducing the burden and impact to zero.

Lilith raised her tiny hands and giggled with no understanding of the situation.

Hamazura placed his feet and Lilith in the cursors displayed in his vision to continually fall back while spinning horizontally and vertically. After moving a certain distance away, he turned tail and made a mad dash for anywhere but here.

“Stop running, dammit!!”

“Did you use super teach that baby those words to insult us by proxy!? That’s the cruelest joke I’ve ever heard!!”

“Aneri, save the movement patterns from just now. Whenever I’m carrying Lilith from now on, base my actions on those ones!!”

(So I can escape both a Level 4 and a Level 5 at once? Just how good is this suit???)

Now that he had caused a commotion, it would be dangerous to stay on the ground where he could run across patrols. To be safe, he used the emergency stairs on the side of a building to escape to the roof. The accent lights coloring the Processor Suit kept

switching between red and yellow.

He heard a lower baby voice than before.

She still was not crying, but Lilith seemed displeased.

(Well, of course she is… She's got to be cold and hungry.)

That said, he could not rely on Takitsubo and the others like he had hoped. This made it much more difficult to get Lilith somewhere safe. He had to think of a way to get her the basic necessities for survival all on his own. But that would just lead back to the same issues again. A suspicious guy in a full-face helmet could not use a normal store, so it would be very difficult to obtain a bottle or diapers.

Then something occurred to him.

(I was able to talk with Takitsubo as long as she couldn't see me. Oh, I know. Can I just buy the supplies without anyone actually seeing me?)

Part 8

These days, anything could be bought online.

By using a ground delivery drone, an electric bicycle with gyros attached to the wheels which was threatening the bike courier and pizza delivery services, you did not even need to meet the delivery boy. And by setting the delivery location somewhere other than your home, you could receive products outside. This was a new service meant to allow online stores to avoid the criticism that they were applying undue pressure on the delivery companies, but since

it had begun serving online auctions and any kind of small packages, the delivery companies felt like it was intentionally meant to drive them out of business.

The roads had recovered since the heat wave, so that kind of unmanned equipment was driving all over the place. With Christmas approaching, people's focus was shifting from necessities to entertainment and luxury items, so there was a large demand.

The problem was Hamazura's current inability to use a mobile device.

…It was possible the high-tech Processor Suit was connected to the internet, but he was not about to try it when there were too many mysteries about how to operate it.

If he could not use his personal possessions, he had to rely on public devices. He could not exactly approach the computers in government offices or libraries, but there was still an option leftover.

"Was this the place…?"

Hamazura's Processor Suit had fully returned to blue.

He had arrived in a supermarket parking lot.

It was already dinnertime, so the store had shifted into its hellish final sale meant to ensure it sold all its inventory. Part-timers dressed as Santas and reindeer were forcefully calling out to people near the glass entrance.

But Hamazura was not here for those wives who looked worried about how short their miniskirts were.

During the day, he had helped install a bank ATM here.

…However, this one was not directly linked to the bank. The convenience store group had a partnership with an online bank. They could also be used to pay public utilities bills and buy tickets, so on normal (and dangerous) websites, it used a public encryption key shared with another company. This was apparently meant as a campaign for the provider, but since it could easily be abused, the middle-aged site manager had told Hamazura not to spread that information around.

An unpleasant chill ran down his spine.

(Come to think of it…)

He thought back to earlier in the day. The touchscreen monitor displayed the usual input guidance, but when he mimicked the finger motions of the engineer who had looked like death itself and had an ominous habit of saying “death march”, the same screen as a home desktop popped up. It apparently used the same base OS. That meant perfectly ordinary viruses could infect it just fine.

(I can tap my finger for clicking and double clicking, but can I not right click?)

At any rate, he was relieved when he saw the same browser anyone would use.

He directly typed the URL of a major search engine into the small screen and found the top page decorated with Santa and some snowmen. But something occurred to him before he went to the online store.

(What was that the #1 mentioned? Ay, oh…)

A. O. Francisca.

He typed it in and hit the search button just to see what turned up.

…It sounded like a name, but he did not find much of anything. In fact, it would not even search specifically for “A. O. Francisca”. To display more search results, it split up the terms and searched them separately without asking. And all it turned up were message boards and walkthrough sites for RPGs and social games. This apparently was not someone who had made much of a name for themselves.

(Nothing, hm? It certainly didn’t sound like a meaningless bluff, though… I just hope this wasn’t scrubbed from the database because it’s related to the dark side.)

He might find something else if he narrowed his search down more, but he was not net savvy enough for that. He only ever typed in whatever he had a question about, so he did not really know how to do a proper search.

(I can’t just surf the web here forever.)

He ended his search there and got down to business.

This time, he used the search engine to call up the site of an online store. His electronic money data was stored on the server, so as long as he typed in his double password, he could login and buy things like normal. They seemed to be having a Christmas sale, so 20% off and 30% off icons were displayed on the edge of the sample product images. Seeing how convenient this was, he could see why the wives and widows in front of the supermarket had been showing some skin.

(Okay, I need some powdered milk, a baby bottle, disinfectant, mineral water…no, soft water. Hm? They have a separate type for babies? I also need diapers, baby powder, a baby blanket, and do they have some warmer clothes?)

He had some memory of what you would need, but he did not have

much detailed information. Partway through, he opened another window to check a childcare site run by a housewife and continued his list. Unlike the models shaped like crane flies, the models that drove along the roads would be fine with a delivery weighing over 10 kilograms. He guessed he would be fine ordering all this.

Lilith made a noise and pointed at the screen.

She apparently needed a small plastic tambourine toy and a pacifier, so he ordered those too. After throwing them all into the cart icon, he pulled up the final confirmation screen.

(I need to select ground drone for the delivery method and then set the time and place… Oh, I know. I can use that park that couples don't even visit at night since delinquents tend to gather there.)

He clicked the confirm purchase button.

And as soon as he did, the gaps between the Processor Suit's armor changed from blue to yellow.

The bright white beams of searchlights suddenly pushed in from all directions.

He felt like the light had actual pressure to it and he used his body to protect Lilith from it.

This was similar to a flash grenade. If a normal person was exposed to this deluge of light, their eyes would be burned, sharp pain would run through their temples, and they might lose all will to fight and just curl up on the spot. Beyond the fearsome light, an amplified voice hit him like a shockwave.

"Disarm yourself and surrender!! We have you surrounded, so resistance will only increase your suffering!!"

The deafening noise instantly drowned out the plain Christmas

songs being played all across the city.

Had they not mentioned a hostage because they were afraid of unnecessarily stimulating him and turning his focus in that direction?

He had completely forgotten something.

The biggest reason that the criminals behind bank transfer scams were caught was because whoever they had withdraw the illicit money from the ATM would be recorded by the security camera. It went without saying what would happen if the network detected odd behavior at an ATM and then the camera showed the same full-face helmet as wanted criminal A. O. Francisca. Plus, he was doing some online shopping with Hamazura Shiage's ID, so he had now established the mysterious masked man's identity as Hamazura Shiage. The authorities might begin monitoring his acquaintances like Takitsubo or Hanzou.

But his pursuers had also forgotten something.

Blinding light and deafening noise only inspired instinctual fear when their opponent's eyes and ears were exposed. Throwing a flash grenade at someone wearing a welding mask or earplugs would not stun them at all. Hamazura's vision through the visor was enhanced in a variety of ways, so the powerful light was counteracted and he was given a clear view of the fully-armed Anti-Skill officers crouched low and moving around beyond that curtain. The thick-barreled guns they held in both hands may have been for tear gas grenades.

(Not good.)

He heard a shrill cry.

It was exposed Lilith and not protected Hamazura who was

suffering. He could not let her undeveloped irises or eardrums take any more of a beating. And if they fired tear gas now, she seriously might suffocate. He knew Anti-Skill meant no harm since they had chosen nonlethal weapons against someone who was using a young baby as a hostage, but their manual must not have expected such a unique sort of hostage because this would have the opposite effect.

(What do I do?)

Aneri lined up a few different guides for him. Would he beat up Anti-Skill and break through them, or would he use the ATM as a foothold to jump to the flat supermarket roof and run away? But he would not escape either option unharmed. And a single tear gas grenade could harm Lilith's respiratory system.

(What do I do…!!!???)

They seemed to think they were hidden by the lights shining on him, but the human silhouettes were clearly colored in for him: blue, yellow, and red. The blue ones were probably the part-time wives being guided inside the supermarket. The yellow were Anti-Skill and the red were the ones he had to most watch out for. Their individual risk was likely determined by a variety of factors like whether they were aiming at him or had their finger on the trigger. A digital countdown appeared above the red silhouettes. The number reduced with each passing second and it had only started at 5.

He could not rely on Aneri here. She must have only thought about the suit's wearer because the Processor Suit's gaps were still only a halfhearted yellow.

It was time to make a decision.

Hamazura bit his lip inside the helmet.

“Okay! I’ll do as you say! I surrender!! Listen, don’t shoot, okay? I’m going to place the baby on the ground, so don’t you dare shoot!!”

It did not take long after that.

He gently placed the baby down on the cold parking lot asphalt and took his hands away. Immediately, Anti-Skill rushed in at full speed. No matter how much the suit enhanced his body, it was still a human body. When someone tackled him while wrapping their arms around his knees, he was unable to control his body weight and he was knocked onto his back. As if to be doubly and triply sure, more and more tough-looking men leaped at him.

His visor was filled with warnings and he was given a long list of counterattacks still available to him.

But Hamazura did not obey Aneri’s instructions.

…This is fine, thought the delinquent boy.

He knew Anti-Skill was sure to keep the baby safe and he had not committed any major crimes himself. And he really did want to get this weird Process Suit off. Having them use their special tools might be the quickest route to that.

Only the baby’s crying continued on without end.

Lilith did not seem to understand the situation. An Anti-Skill officer was holding her, but she had crumpled up her face like a monkey and was desperately trying to reach her short arms out toward him.

“7:20 PM, emergency arrest complete!! The suspect’s details are unknown and the hostage is confirmed alive!!”

Hamazura listened to that shouted report in a detached way, but there was one thing that troubled him.

…Even with all these tough Anti-Skill officers on top of him, he showed no sign at all of passing out.

Part 9

“Nn!!”

With a shout far too cute for a widow in mourning clothes, a shockwave-like roar rang out.

“I never knew there was such a safe and simple method of measuring the strength of my punch. This was a complete blind spot for me.”

She was in one corner of an arcade that felt like it was about to close up for the night. The giant punching machine’s earthquake-resistant bolts had broken and it wobbled unsteadily. The gamers had been glued to a Youkai battle game where a Zashiki Warashi, a Yuki Onna, and such grabbed at each other’s hair and punched each other (and was providing seasonal SSR Christmas costumes from the card vendor), but their attention began to gather on the party games that had been driven into a back corner.

That fist had knocked down Academy City’s #1 not long before.

As she beat all the high scores in quick succession, the part-time worker grew pale because he had been gradually increasing his score using the cleanup time after closing. Mina would slam her entire body forward, so her upper body would lean up onto the machine when she hit. That caused the skirt of her mourning clothes to ride up quite a bit, but she showed no sign of caring.

Leaning against the wall nearby, a white-haired, red-eyed monster

with a modern design cane clicked his tongue.

“I see. So this is what it feels like to work up a sweat. Fascinating.”

“Does this mean you really did get involved in all this without knowing a damn thing that was going on?”

“More or less.”

Anyone who knew the legends of the #1 would have pissed themselves, but Mina Mathers had not been torn to pieces. In fact, it had been Accelerator who first demanded they stop their no-rules street fight. The black cat witch’s fist could never do any real damage, but she kept dodging just out of the way, preventing the #1 from getting in a finishing blow. In other words, it was an endless stalemate. Since his choker only had so much battery power, that was not an amusing situation for Accelerator.

And once the #1’s target had escaped to safety, Mina apparently had nothing against Accelerator himself.

Thanks to that, the bored widow had persistently followed the white-haired demon around and pestered him to play with her.

You would think she had a death wish, but the fact that she was still alive may have shown that Mina Mathers’s skill was the real deal.

“I too am searching for someone, but it is not them. Well, he does love parties and he loves being inappropriate more than anything else in the world, so there is a good chance I could draw him out by causing a major commotion.”

“Them?”

“The riding suit and the baby.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

“That’s what you’re focused on? Then I’m guessing you aren’t connected to the ‘parent’ either. This was all a giant waste of time.”

“The parent?”

The black cat witch frowned and thought of that baby, but…

“That Processor Suit seems to reproduce a portion of my power as a defense mechanism.”

“Processor Suit. That is a rather low key name for a weapon. Do they focus on defense as its greatest sales point?”

“They probably intend to split the enemy’s head open with a thick shield, like a shield bash or something.”

“Nn!!” shouted the black cat witch once more.

More than just raise her arm, she directed her entire body toward the punching machine. Despite using a bizarre breathing method where she exhaled strongly with her lips tightly shut, the destructive power made it seem like she had a small bomb hidden in her fist.

A great roar burst out and Mina watched the digital counter while continuing the conversation. Perhaps to measure the gravitational effect, she took a meaningless step that jiggled her breasts a fair bit.

“In other words, you suspect it was developed for a purpose other than combat? In that case, it must be meant to protect something quite valuable.”

“Of course. That thing might be even more valuable than me.”

“…Are you aware of how valuable the genetic information of Academy City’s #1 would be?”

“Do I look so stupid I don’t know my own value? Besides, that thing is-…”

Accelerator trailed off when he heard a quick burst of static. With advances in mobile technology, the boundary between military radios and smartphones was beginning to blur. At the very least, it was possible for either one to intercept and decrypt the digital signal of the other.

The black cat witch repeatedly punched her palm with the thick glove worn over her right hand.

“Oh, where are you going?” she asked.

“It seems things have changed,” he spat out. “A certain idiot just got arrested. The one in the suit.”

Part 10

After all that, he found himself in District 7’s Central Anti-Skill Station.

It was similar to a prefectural police headquarters outside of Academy City. Hamazura was covered head to toe by the strange Processor Suit, so they had cautiously bound him like a scene from Gulliver’s Travels and then taken him to an interrogation room.

The blue light told him he had nothing to worry about. Also, this was far from his first time in an interrogation room like this. Although he had enough sense left to know his life had truly derailed if he began to brag about that fact.

And something odd was sitting atop the steel desk: katsudon.

“Hey, I know you see it a lot in police dramas, but isn’t it against the rules to feed me something like this during an interrogation?”

“We aren’t giving it to the suspect. It’s meant for us and you simply ‘steal’ it while we aren’t looking. That’s the official story anyway.”

“Then I’d be committing theft! Isn’t inducing someone to commit a crime really, really against the rules!?”

The young male Anti-Skill officer sounded exasperated with this extremely suspicious person’s legitimate questions.

“Aren’t you getting hungry? So go ahead and eat it. Just remove that helmet.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I can’t? In fact, bring out a toolbox full of crowbars and wrenches! Anti-Skill’s gotta have a ton of that stuff, right!? Y’know, like what you use to pry open a car door after an accident!! C’mon, c’mon!! Hurry it up!!”

“Y’know…”

“And if you have enough money for katsudon, then get Lilith a bottle. Stations these days have nurseries for any officers with little kids, right? You can’t tell me you don’t have the supplies.”

“I don’t know if you think you’re Ishikawa Goemon or Nezumi Kozou, but what is it with the occasional criminal who feels like he can lecture us?”

“And if you figure out who Lilith’s parents are, are you just going to take her back to them? …Those are the people who abandoned her in a back alley! I doubt you’re that stupid, but it’s still worth warning you. You should probably consult with your lawyer first if you are considering it.”

“You’re the one that needs a lawyer. And are you about ready to

remove that suit yet?”

“Again, I don’t know how to.”

The exasperated teacher was the shining and attractive type who would be a popular with his students if he was the coach of a sports team. Yes, Anti-Skill officers were generally also teachers. That was why this strict interrogation room looked more like a school’s student guidance room once you were used to it. The only real differences were the bars over the window, the sink in the corner, and the monitoring room hidden behind a special mirror. The desk and chairs were not bolted to the floor. Hamazura could only call that careless.

“As I explained several times on the way here, I don’t know how to take it off. Damn, the katsudon’s getting cold. What a waste. Now that I think about it, how do I eat or use the bathroom in this thing?”

Two icons appeared in the corner of his vision. The one shaped like a straw in a cup flashed and then a small cover opened on the side of the helmet’s mouth.

“Am I supposed to stick the katsudon in a blender and then drink it through here as a nutritious smoothie?”

But then what was the other icon for? He had a bad feeling about what that flashing icon meant, especially since it looked an awful lot like a toilet.

“(Hey, stop, Aneri! Don’t open that! Everything that happens in modern interrogation rooms has to be recorded! Okay, I get it! I get that you can do just about anything!)”

“What are you fidgeting around below the table for?”

To the Anti-Skill officer, a desperate battle to preserve Hamazura's adolescent pride looked like nothing more than a one-man skit.

As Hamazura suppressed the machine empire's rebellion, the Anti-Skill officer placed a notebook-sized tablet computer on the steel desk.

"Now, let's hear your testimony again to make sure there are no contradictions."

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to do this another three times? I know how this works, so can we just get it over with? And is that judo 3rd dan guy glaring at me from the corner meant for your 'good cop, bad cop' routine?"

"?"

"His ear's all swollen from within from being rubbed against the tatami mats so much, so it's pretty obvious. And the silent type doesn't really work for the bad cop. Plus, it's even less effective when I know the trick, so you're just wasting labor costs here."

He was honestly willing to tell them anything as long as it was not related to Takitsubo, Mugino, and Kinuhata. He almost felt sorry for the adults applying so much pressure to him when he knew they would later realize he was innocent and be forced to apologize. He kind of wanted them to send in their profiler and forensics team since it would only make their own situation worse, like they were strangling themselves with silk floss.

"Now, what should I tell you first?"

"We are the ones in control of this interrogation."

He realized this was going to be a long night and Aneri helpfully displayed a simple falling block puzzle in the corner of his vision.

However.

A great tremor shook the entire building.

And then all the lights went out.

“?”

Hamazura was not all that surprised thank to the Processor Suit’s visor. The room was now darker than a movie theater, but the visor immediately adjusted its brightness so everything looked the same as it would during midday.

The delinquent’s Processor Suit glowed yellow.

That was the warning color.

It was only a pale light at a single point, so it was not enough to sweep away the room’s darkness.

In fact, it was the professional Anti-Skill officers who began moving around in confusion with their vision so suddenly taken from them.

“What? The emergency power isn’t kicking in!?”

Several sets of rushed footsteps clattered by the metal door. After a while, the building shook again. Then some voices arrived over the Anti-Skill radios which were not reliant on the station’s power.

“The bastard walked right up to the front entrance!! This is no mere accident. I need backup! Repeat, I request backup!!”

The radio monitor’s backlight must have helped him see because it lit up the shining young man’s face from below, giving him a ghastly look as he glared at Hamazura.

“What is this? An accomplice of yours!?”

“How should I know?”

Hamazura dismissively waved a hand.

…He knew Mugino or Kinuhata could easily mop the floor with an Anti-Skill group, but since they did not believe that the full-body suit pervert was him, they would not be here to rescue him. In fact, he had his doubts whether they would come rescue him even if he pleaded them to.

However, he did have a guess who this was.

Anti-Skill pursuing him and the discovery of Lilith had both been detours. This whole issue was centered on Hamazura Shiage and the Process Suit containing Aneri.

And who was it that had pursued and attacked him?

(Oh, geez. Is he that intent on attacking me?)

“A-anyway, you stay here. We’ll be locking the door from outside, so you won’t be able to leave. If you do, it will only add to your list of charges. Listen, this interrogation room is sturdy. And that’s for your protection too!!”

“If you say so.”

With a tragic aura around them, the shining young man and the judo 3rd dan exchanged a nod and left the interrogation room. It would have been a meaningless act given the Processor Suit’s artificial strength, but it was careless of them not to handcuff him.

“Sigh…”

Hamazura softly sighed as he tried for a triple combo in the puzzle game, screwed it up, and ended up with a pile of garbage.

There was a simple reason why he was so unconcerned despite this crisis.

(This has got to be that #1 freak! I don't know what kind of secrets this Processor Suit holds, but unlike me, he's smart, so if I just leave this to him, he'll solve this whole confusing mess for me. Yes, yes. I just have to let that chosen genius – that true dark hero – beat me up to pass the baton onto him. I see, I see. Well, I was ready to jump straight to the ending and roll the credits once I got Lilith safely to the adults. I don't know if the fate of the world or the hope of humanity is riding on this, but you just go deal with it on your own. God, what a pain.)

Several more powerful tremors assaulted the central station. Hamazura ignored that to focus on the puzzle game, but he failed to recover from the triple combo attempt and the blocks stacked up to the ceiling.

Once the game over screen changed to the continue selection screen, he looked up.

…And he realized everything had gone silent.

"…Hey?"

He also realized the Processor Suit's gaps were switching back and forth between yellow and red.

Unable to bear the same heavy silence as on an elevator, he began to speak aloud. There was of course no one to answer him. The sink's special mirror had shattered and its pieces covered the floor, so he could see the monitoring room on the other side. And there was no sign of anyone there.

"Knowing him, he'll go easy on normal people. Won't he? Right!?"

His voice was simply absorbed by the darkness. At some point, the area had been taken over by the same forlorn atmosphere felt after being left behind in an abandoned building in the middle of the night. What did this mean? Had it not been as simple as he thought?

…And if there was no one here, what had happened to Lilith after she was supposedly taken to safety?

“Are you goddamn kidding me!?”

The interrogation room could not be opened from within after it was locked, but the monitoring room visible through the sink’s broken mirror was a different matter. He stuck his head in, climbed into a room lined with LCD screens, and reached for the doorknob. He had no idea why it mattered, but he tried to be as silent as possible by slowly turning the knob and opening the door only a crack.

There was no light outside.

The dark scene was mechanically corrected. The tremors must have been powerful indeed because cracks ran through the walls and ceiling, and panels of construction material had fallen to the floor in a lot of places. And he saw no one anywhere. No matter how much the brightness and color saturation were adjusted, the atmosphere of a creepy abandoned building crawled up from his feet.

An unpleasant chill ran down his spine.

Driven by something invisible, Hamazura opened his mouth.

“Aneri, is there any way to locate Lilith?”

The puzzle game window closed and a map of the central station opened in its place. And a red dot was added to it. That was the

employee nursery on the third floor, same as the interrogation room. The dot was flashing irregularly, but was that because the suit was amplifying and detecting Lilith's cries?

He had been warned leaving here would add to his charges.

Even if it had begun with false accusations, there might be no arguing his way out of what he was doing now.

"…"

He slowly breathed in and out.

And he made up his mind.

(I would never forgive myself if I let something happen to that baby.)

He took the step.

He entered the shadowy hallway and walked as silently as possible.

He saw Christmas trees and Santa dolls here and there. Perhaps in a collaboration with some kind of manga or anime, a recruitment poster on the wall had a few teenage soldiers lined up in front of a 50m colossal weapon with the text "How about a job that helps protect the city!?" All of it looked like stuffed animals in an abandoned hospital. It felt like an insult to whoever had made them and decorated the place with them, but they just looked so creepy in the darkness.

Just then, he reached a stairway and heard intermittent bursts of gunfire from below. Someone was apparently there. Hamazura had no way of knowing if those were nonlethal rubber bullets or if they had switched to lead bullets. Either way, he could not let Lilith be caught in this mayhem. A rubber bullet might be nonlethal for an adult, but it could easily kill a baby.

He had to recover Lilith as soon as possible.

That was the only thing on his mind, but something pinned his feet in place. No, he could not take his eyes off the stairs leading down. A sort of sixth sense that could not be enhanced by the machine was warning him that he could lose his life if he did not focus on this here.

The noisy vortex of gunfire had stopped at some point.

And yet the sinister atmosphere down the stairs remained unchanged. No, it had grown stronger. Only now did Hamazura realize the sense of danger had not come from the gunfire. Something much more frightening was approaching.

"…"

Unable to speak properly, he saw something enter his vision. It came from below the stairs. It carelessly appeared on the landing there. It would have been the perfect spot to fire on if Hamazura had a gun, but it showed no sign of caring about that disadvantage.

It was a person wearing a skintight suit of unknown material that covered them from head to toe.

This enemy had something like an amorphous gel equipped like a piece of external equipment.

This was the true wanted criminal wearing the same equipment as Hamazura Shiage.

This was A. O. Francisca.

He did not know what they really looked like.

But because they had already clashed, he could rule out one person. The person Hamazura had thought was the most likely

suspect had not worn a Processor Suit.

As soon as they faced each other, the light filling the gaps of the armor changed to a sinister red.

In other words…

“It’s…not Accelerator!?”

Between the Lines 1

Once they got flying, they quickly left the earth behind.

The Windowless Building had already been thrown out into dark outer space where it floated with no concern for the orbits of any celestial bodies.

Naturally, the large hole in the wall was also ignored.

The situation was as tragic as stuffing a victim in a barrel and throwing them overboard into the sea, but Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass maintained his smile.

Conversely, the woman with extremely long blonde hair held her throat and grimaced while that shining hair danced like snakes in the weightlessness.

Of course, it was extremely abnormal for that to be all that happened to her.

Skydiving video did not provide a sense of falling because there was nothing to compare the skydiver to. Similarly, it was hard to tell what was so incredible about Aiwass and Coronzon when they

were together like this.

“Dung pile, your worthless self is one thing, but what about your borrowed avatar? This environment should be just right. The concepts of the cardinal directions should vanish soon and then the North Star will also lose all meaning.”

“Kh.”

“Heh heh. Are you worried about Lola’s condition? It certainly is ironic to think a being like you would be concerned about a human.”

“…Do you think you’ve brought peace to the world or something?”

“I guess it was wrong to expect anything of a bath stain’s memory. To reiterate, Magic God High Priest returned from space, did he not? Well, if you thought that was as deep as it gets, then you’re going to be truly shocked by the next trick. That’s one more thing to look forward to.”

“I don’t even need to return.” The being borrowing Lola’s body sneered. “Did you think I only had the one avatar? …I’ll screw it all up for you. Since you’re leaving me alone up here, I can only assume you’re trying to buy time for something, but that will end in failure.”

“…”

“A. O. Francisca.”

“Hmm. That is quite the name, but does it actually mean anything?”

“Whatever happens to the British Commonwealth, the leader of the science side, Academy City, belongs to me. So I will make my comeback from there. Aleister might have the upper hand at the

moment, but this is him we're talking about: he's sure to fail somewhere along the line. My toys belong to me, so I choose where to light the fuse and let them burn."

Chapter 2: An Awakening Beast Visits a City of Steel – X=Scarlet.

Part 1

This happened just 10 minutes before the attack on the District 7 Central Anti-Skill Station.

A silhouette wriggled through the darkness.

That organism had no definite form. Its mass was limited to 32kg and its color and shape could be freely rearranged.

Thus, the organism's standard strategy was to wait. It was more like a jellyfish or sea anemone than a squid or octopus. It scanned the surrounding environment, camouflaged itself as the bait most likely to draw the target in, and then did nothing more than wait. Near a cave or sunken ship, it would become a treasure chest. At a mountain cabin during winter, it would become a warming stove or a firewood tree. In a desert village, it would become a jug of water. That was how it was meant to work.

However, there were some targets it could not hunt only by waiting.

It could move autonomously in those cases.

Although it would seem odd for a treasure chest or water jug to move on its own, so this only applied in certain situations.

"Oh?"

The Anti-Skill officers protecting the main entrance of the building may not have done anything wrong.

They truly did not approach the organism for the indecent reasons its form had been chosen for. When they saw *that* wandering around so late at night, it was only natural to want to protect it. Plus, this was the Central Anti-Skill Station. They could not deny the possibility that it was here in search of help due to a major problem at home or school. And this was all the more suspicious given the bare feet and almost transparently thin dress during winter. That was enough to hint some kind of crime, so they could not just ignore this.

“What brings you here so late, miss?”

The Anti-Skill guard crouched down to eye level and spoke to *that* with a smile. He had of course been placed at the front entrance because he was tough, but if he glared suspiciously at everyone, they would lose the people’s trust and no one would cooperate with them. That was why the guards at the front entrance needed to be both tough and sociable.

But perhaps he should have used those senses to detect something fishy about this.

Was his tough side or his sociable side needed here?

To repeat, that organism had no definite form.

It scanned the surrounding environment and redesigned itself in the shape and colors that would best capture its prey. Within its 32kg limit, it needed to become some kind of bait that blended into the scenery of this civilized nation’s metropolis while also drawing the greatest number of targets into the lethal range, whether that was out of a sense of justice or more indecent motives.

It had found the optimal answer.

Like some kind of crack, a small vertical wound ran down that lovely girl's forehead.

No, it was not just a wound. It was clearly wriggling.

For some reason, the Anti-Skill guard viewed that bizarre phenomenon in a very unscientific way.

(Is that a third-…?)

He thought it was an eye.

But it was not.

That girl stood less than 130cm tall and a straight line ran down from the top of her head to the bottom of her crotch.

That was a Mimetic Predator.

And its entire body opened wide to the left and right, just like an iron maiden.

Part 2

And back to the present.

Hamazura and the assassin both emitted red light.

On the landing between the 2nd and 3rd floors of the District 7 Central Anti-Skill Station, an amorphous sludge seemed to surround the Processor Suit man standing there.

No, that was more than just filth.

The fluid's regular movements gathered it around the Processor Suit man's body. It mostly focused on the upper arms and the thighs. Several frightening weapons shot out. Long bewitching curves not often seen in machines gathered together to form something like jellyfish or sea anemone tentacles. More than just stab or constrict, these combat manipulators could cause definite harm just by lightly touching the target.

Not all mechanical products were made of straight lines and metal.

In fact, this use of cytoplasmic weapons seemed to show off just how high this opponent's specs were.

(Is that the same suit as mine…? No, is theirs even better than mine!?)

Neither of them needed a starting signal.

Just as the giant combat manipulators seemed to wriggle out from the upper arms and thighs of that humanoid silhouette, those jellyfish or anemone curves formed fearsome spears and rushed in to skewer Hamazura from a variety of angles.

Aneri provided a warning, Hamazura placed his feet in the colorful markers that Aneri displayed on the floor, and he punched the side of one spear after dodging them all. It only felt like a slight bump with the surface of his fist, but he had used another incredible move. His full body weight shifted from his legs and hips to focus on just his fist as he solidly struck the mystery sludge. He had no idea what the move was called.

If those really were modeled after a jellyfish or anemone, countless poison stingers could inject some kind of chemical into him as soon as he touched it, but his entire body was covered by the Processor

Suit's special material.

It was more of an explosion than a roar.

The severed amorphous thing rolled along the floor and flopped around like an octopus leg.

(He didn't take any steps like he's playing a dance game. I have Aneri and he has that sludge. Are the Processor Suits the same, but they have different optional add-ons?)

But it was not over yet. The many transparent jellyfish tentacles wrapped together and changed their color and texture. They quickly molded their entire body into an entirely different form.

It was a girl of less than 130cm who inspired an incredible protective urge.

For some reason she had fallen onto her butt with her legs spread.

But Hamazura sighed and ignored how she lightly bit her thumb and gave him an upturned glance.

"Sorry, but I'm more into short girls with big tits!!!!!"

He then chose another incredible move. He sent a kick to the center of her solar plexus to mercilessly launch that organism weapon to the far end of the straight hallway.

However, it did not work properly.

But not because she was entirely unfazed by the attack.

In fact, she was even softer than a normal human body. As if she was a gummy doll without a spine, her small body bent back at a right angle. And he felt a strange crawling sensation on the bottom of his foot.

It was the same as a siren that used the frequency of a baby crying.

She had been specifically designed to provide the most unpleasant and guilt-inducing sensation the human body could experience.

“Ur…p!?”

He heard a quiet sound.

Like the tail lights of a car, a red trail of light moved through the sticky darkness. That little game had bought enough time for the wanted criminal known as A. O. Francisca to not just leave the stairway landing but cling to the hallway ceiling.

This was clearly using the same specs as Hamazura’s suit.

He continued placing his feet where Aneri told him, but his backhand blows only sliced through the air and accomplished nothing. After he moved his head aside at the last second to avoid a flying kick meant as a cross counter, Hamazura and A. O. Francisca moved in a small circle to re-judge the distance between them. …It looked cool and all, but all Hamazura was doing was playing the dance game developed by Aneri.

…This was apparently the inevitable result when he was up against someone with the same specs.

Simply put, it would never end one way or the other.

Except his opponent also had that spread-legs bait. Even with Aneri’s support, he would be worn down first if this continued at length.

He could not think about fighting and winning.

He chose an incredible move. Just as the wanted criminal’s fist flew straight toward him, he swung his torso to dodge and then

slammed his heel against the floor instead of his opponent. The thick building material immediately sank down, several thick cracks ran through the floor, and A. O. Francisca was dragged to the next floor down like an antlion pit.

Had they been prepared in advance or not?

That was what divided their fates. Hamazura kicked off the wall and ceiling to reach safety before he was dragged down as well.

He had to focus on Lilith for now.

His opponent persistently threw that organism weapon that stabbed toward him like a transparent jellyfish tentacle spear. It had twintails, then a side tail, and then a giant ribbon. It wore a dress with an extremely short miniskirt, then shorts, and then a school swimsuit. But Hamazura grabbed that transforming assassin by her slender neck and slammed her into the bar-covered reinforced glass of a window to throw her out into the night sky from three stories up.

He had supposedly grabbed her by the neck, but that short period of contact had left a deep wound in the armor on the back of his hand. Blood-red light flashed behind the armor. Even after being attacked, he had no idea what she had done to him. But he was fairly certain he had seen something creepily wriggling on the slender throat of that organism weapon as she vanished into the darkness.

“…Now that’s dangerous.”

He doubted the wanted criminal or the organism weapon would die from this. This time, Hamazura really did run toward the nursery for employee families located on the same floor. He could no longer rely on Anti-Skill. He had a bad feeling about what would happen if he did not get Lilith out of here.

Even so, the distance from the direct threat meant the light in the Processor Suit's gaps briefly lowered from red to yellow.

On the way, he found an Anti-Skill officer sitting in the hallway with her back resting on the wall.

Either the organism weapon had been allowed to move freely through the building before A. O. Francisca's entrance, or she had been hit by a ceiling panel knocked loose by the shaking of the building. The details were unclear.

"Aneri, can I give her first aid!?"

Since Aneri did not try to resist, was the suit learning his thought patterns through experience, just like a spam filter?

An unpleasant *chill* ran down his spine.

A decorated Christmas tree and its LED string of lights (which was dark with the power out) were highlighted, so he followed the instructions by tearing off a decorative stick, pulling off the string of lights, and making a splint for the Anti-Skill officer's right leg. He could only manage this with Aneri's help. Only after he had started working did he belatedly realize he was treating a sprained ankle.

"Uuh…"

The groaning woman had a large chest and long black hair tied back. The combination of a track suit and giant breasts reminded him of his girlfriend. …But it was Hanzou who was obsessed with this busty track suit Anti-Skill officer. He kind of felt like his feelings would lose some of their purity otherwise, so he hoped this did not imprint anything on him. It was important to remain dedicated to the one you loved. And whether in a pink track suit or a navel-baring miniskirt Santa costume, he loved what he loved!

“Why is a suspect…wandering around out here? Who are you…?’

“No, uh, who are you? I, um, certainly don’t recognize you.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter. That child is in the nursery back here. We can’t contain that thing.”

With that said, the busty track suit teacher pulled something from her pants pocket and placed it in his hand.

It was a small key.

“This is the key to the storeroom on the way… There’s a whole mountain of special cash in there, so you might be able to buy some time by unlocking and opening the door.”

“Special cash?”

“Officially made counterfeit money meant to fool hostage-takers and scammers. They have a special perfume on them that only a trained dog can detect.” The Anti-Skill woman let out a rough breath and smiled thinly. “I know this isn’t something I should be asking of you, but I’m going to do so anyway. If you can still move, then I leave this in your hands. Please protect that child.”

Hamazura could not help but click his tongue.

Anti-Skill had been restricting his actions, but they were not the bad guys here. But if she remained here, she was at risk of being hit by a stray attack. The best way of saving the immobilized survivors was for him and his enemy to leave the building right this moment.

He whispered just one thing before continuing on.

“Don’t let you guard down around the other guy in a Processor Suit. He won’t show any mercy.”

“You…?”

Getting out of here was the best thing he could do for Anti-Skill, so he left the injured woman and continued down the hallway. He used the key given to him by the track suit woman to open the storeroom door on the way. He then made his way to a door covered in winter mascots like Santa and a snow rabbit.

“Lilith!! Are you okay!?”

He knew she could not understand him, but he still shouted to her. It may have been mostly just to give voice to what he hoped was true.

“Dahh!” was the cheerful reply that showed no understanding of the situation.

Lilith was lying in a baby bed that doubled as a cradle and was shaped like a sled. She held a red and yellow trumpet toy that he did not recognize. He sensed a sweet aroma from her mouth, so she had probably been given powdered milk dissolved in warm water. Anti-Skill had apparently been treating her right. That was one more reason not to let the adults be slaughtered. He could not repay their kindness with cruelty.

He wished he could gather up a few baby products, but he could not carry very much with him. He only grabbed Lilith from the sled baby bed.

“We’re going back out into the cold, but bear with it, okay?”

Hamazura analyzed why he said that when she would not understand him. Had he felt it would be dishonest of him not to explain the situation?

That was when he heard a footstep in front of the nursery door.

That was all it took for red curves to race across Hamazura's body.

(!? What, did he completely ignore the pile of cash!?)

Several transparent tentacle spears shot out, shredded the door decorated with animal mascots, and scattered it in more than 10 pieces. As the cytoplasmic weapons reattached to the Processor Suit's back as a single mass, A. O. Francisca stepped inside. His warning light was red too. Hamazura held someone he could not allow to be hit and now the exit was blocked. His freedom of choice was being narrowed down more and more before the actual clash began.

However.

Something broke through the side wall before the two people in identical suits could do anything more.

It was a monster with creepy white hair and blood-red eyes who appeared from the other side of the wall.

He spoke just once.

"…Such nonsense."

"Waaaahh!?"

(I'm screwed! Wait, what do I do!? What do I do about Lilith!? I can't just leave her here, but she'll be killed along with me if I'm holding her! What's the right thing to do here, dammit!? Is there even a perfect answer!? And time is passing while I think!)

Hamazura shrank down like lightning had struck a nearby tree and he tried to protect Lilith.

But luckily, if you could call it that…

(Wait, huh? I'm alive?)

For some reason, Academy City's #1 charged toward the wanted criminal first.

That was enough. Hamazura did not need a clever answer.

There may have been a good reason for the monster's actions, but it may have been a mere whim. Whatever the case, the dumb delinquent stopped giving his mind a rare workout. He adjusted Lilith's position in his arms, ran toward the window instead of the door, and broke through the barred reinforced glass to enter the night sky at three stories up.

His jumping distance easily surpassed the limits of a normal person.

He flew past the tall fence meant to prevent escapees and he entered the normal city.

Lilith giggled with joy at the strange sense of floating and Hamazura searched for a landing point. Aneri displayed the recommended route on his visor.

"A large truck!? Really!?"

So as not to shake Lilith, he bent his legs to absorb the impact and somehow managed to land on top of a truck decorated with Christmas lights. But this had apparently been the right choice. The Processor Suit's colored accent changed from red to yellow and then to blue.

When he finally breathed a sigh of relief, he heard the tooting of a cheap horn.

He looked down to see Lilith had the plastic trumpet toy in her mouth. She had apparently managed to hold onto her favorite despite everything going on.

She seemed to be in a good mood.

Part 3

They were sneaking around.

In the alley between two buildings, silver-haired Aleis-tan poked her head out to check on something. She(?) held a piece of paper the size of a yen note and let it flutter in the wind.

“No reaction.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“No, not entirely. Once we have made our preparations and worked up our resolve, it would be a problem if we could not find her. That is half the purpose of this litmus test.”

“What are we doing now?”

“Index or Misaka Mikoto. I said we wanted to locate them to solidify our foundation, didn’t I?”

She wore a witch hat and a cloak over her double blazer uniform, but without the cloak he would have been able to see right up her miniskirt as she stuck her hips out toward him. But Kamijou Touma did not consider that to be lucky. The dirty old man was already acquiring a high school girl’s mentality of a bare-minimum defense!

Although the way it was all so perfectly calculated out made it seem more like the product of a dirty old man.

“As I said before, this protective charm is guaranteed to lose to

Coronzon. The greater her influence grows, the more it will destroy itself. So as long as it remains unharmed, we can assume we are safe from her invisible influence. That means there is no need for you to swing your right fist around at random."

"…"

"Don't give me that sullen look. The most frightening thing in the world is to not know whether or not the events before your eyes are connected to the mastermind. What about that sudden accident or fire? What about all the misfortune that keeps befalling you? What about that person you ran into on the street? Once everything and everyone appears suspicious, you will only distance yourself from the truth. At times like that, it helps to have a protective charm that converts those suspicions into a visible form. You can divide the coincidences from the intentional and locate the hurdles you must overcome." Aleister waved the paper around. "Coronzon's scheme is like a three-dimensional maze. It goes well beyond appearing on the front line herself. The best way to keep yourself from getting lost is to view the whole from a flat viewpoint. And that applies to both your enemies and your allies."

"I feel like that would make Othinus really mad…"

"You seem to view trust as a virtue, but a fixed viewpoint only creates mental blind spots."

Once she finished checking whatever it was, Aleister stepped out into the nighttime street.

Kamijou honestly had no real obligation to stay with her, but he was afraid what would happen if he let this unprecedented magician roam free. Someone needed to keep a tight grip on her leash.

"Hey, where are you going?"

“If we simply needed to hide, we could have remained in that leisure hotel. Why do you think we used that closed room to separate and extract chemicals and ultimately create this charm? A litmus test is meaningless if all we do is hide. You need to assume we will be heading out into danger.”

Aleister acted all self-important, but she still grabbed Kamijou’s arm as she walked through the city night.

Silence hung over them for a while.

The silver-haired girl breathed a white sigh as she viewed the scenery she had constructed and was now letting go.

“It was pure coincidence that I first visited Japan.”

“?”

“But I just couldn’t forget the impact of seeing the large Buddha statue on Kamakura land. When I *made it so that* I died on British land in 1947, there was only one choice for where I would make my comeback. I had already lost interest in Sicily and Paris by then. And I will admit the choice was somewhat influenced by that doctor who supported me and transported me when I was near death.”

She mentioned a year far in the past.

That was a year from the history books, just after a major war. It was hard to say this country had recovered by that time. Or was that exactly why? That had been the only opportunity to construct such an extraordinary institution in western Tokyo in the name of giving the country an educational and technological recovery.

“I made sure it had everything I would need. Including room for growth. Just as I had seen in those shrines, those temples, and that Buddha statue, when I gave these agricultural people a single goal

and built up a specialized field for them, their nature was perfect for constructing a scientific and academic city entirely cut off from the occult. …But perhaps what I was really building was the Japanese scenery that I so longed for. Looking back on it, I may have been more motivated by my hatred for Christianity."

The silver-haired girl finally stopped in front of a used book chain. It apparently stayed open quite late for a bookstore. A Christmas song played over the store speakers and most of the customers were reading something they probably had no intention of actually buying. The silver-haired girl did not hesitate to step inside.

"…"

"What is it?"

"Well, I was just wondering if I would find one of my books in here. But I suppose they are just too minor. They would have made the perfect material for some book divination."

"Aren't those the kind of dangerous grimoires that Index stores? You're not just going to find them lying around."

"Try actually knowing what you're talking about before you criticize someone. A few of my books were plays or novels. My 'death' occurred on December 1, so I tend to grow sentimental during this season. Please just overlook this."

With a thin smile, Aleister took Kamijou's arm and pulled him behind one of the bookcases lined up in something like a maze. Kamijou was unsure if he should protest this old man who had the warmth and scent of a soft girl, but then the silver-haired girl gently whispered in his ear.

"(Index and Misaka Mikoto are one thing, but not even Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Karasuma Fran have shown up? That

is most curious. I will admit the science infrastructure is lacking at the moment, but surely they can use individual magic to track us down. Or are they being jammed by some third party?)”

“Hm? I’m not sure what that means, but can we meet up with them or not?”

“(Anti-Skill is busy with something. I could easily search out all this information if I could only use Underline with administrative privileges. No, I wouldn’t even need to go that far. I would only need to check for unnatural tremors on the seismographs laid out in a grid. Well, I’m the one that launched the Windowless Building, so I can’t be picky. Regardless, something is happening nearby, so let’s be careful.)”

She continued tugging on his arm, providing a soft sensation as they left through a different exit.

Aleister was tightly clinging to Kamijou’s right arm, but they oddly did not stand out much. When he looked around again, he realized the Christmas-decorated city was filled with young couples flirting. Even a part-time Santa and snowman were sweetly enjoying each other’s company on the job. Did that all sound rather vague? Of course it was. We can’t exactly provide a detailed description of this kind of December night, dammit.

Mixed in with the part-time Santa cosplayers was a bunny girl gathering participants for some kind of sketchy survey or monitoring. Kamijou had a dead look in his eyes as they walked by all that.

“Why am I spending this romantic night with a dirty old man who belongs in a history book? And I still have two holes in me, remember? At this point, I just want to die…”

“You should not speak of death so lightly, boy. Do you want to have

the abyss gaze back into you? …Anyway, the real bottleneck at this point is probably Tsuchimikado Motoharu.”

“?”

“Even if the others have special powers or talents, they were no more than amateurs. Tsuchimikado Motoharu, on the other hand, is a professional. If we can’t locate him, then it would be faster to do something he would notice. And we will of course have to watch out for any unexpected third parties, but…but…”

“What? Is something bothering you?”

“Yes. Tsuchimikado Motoharu, hm? Why does something feel off to me?”

Kamijou fell silent there. It was easy to forget with everything that had happened afterwards, but hadn’t they initially headed to the Windowless Building because that rotten sunglasses boy had said something about having shot the Board Chairman in the head? Kamijou could not have that memory returning here, so he put on as big a smile as he could manage and changed the subject.

“I’ve been meaning to ask: What’s going on in this city?”

“That is what I am looking into, one thing at a time. Of course, I tend to move from one failure to another, so I cannot guarantee anything.”

The silver-haired girl pressed her head against his shoulder and sounded exasperated, but there was a somewhat envious note to her voice.

“Coronzon is using Lola’s body as an avatar and she is attempting to harm me so she can hijack Academy City. You understand that much, correct?’

“Yes, but I can’t say I really understand *all* of it.”

“Good enough. Honesty is a virtue.” The magician giggled. “Several incredibly dangerous things are hidden in Academy City. I cannot allow Lola…no, Coronzon to steal them, but the most important one of all is the Bank.”

“Hmm. You mean that thing that stores all of our grades?”

“The grades from each school, all other esper development data, the chemicals and equipment used for the esper development, and all other Academy City research data is stored and searchable in that single large database. The next-generation weapons and esper powers tend to stand out, but Academy City’s greatest weapon is its scientific knowledge. Having that stolen in its entirety would bring the most harm to the world.”

That would allow a demon to abuse all the technology covering the world.

No, since there was no clear division between science and magic, could it become the puzzle piece that Coronzon needed to *complete her incomplete knowledge*? Would it fill in the missing half?

What had Magic God Othinus once acquired by bringing science and magic together? Remembering that was enough to trigger alarm bells in Kamijou’s mind.

“Coronzon’s main form is the one inside Lola and thus not on earth at the moment,” said Aleister. “But there is no way Coronzon will give up. That means she is sure to use every one of her pieces on the Academy City board to target that largest of server systems. For example…”

An Anti-Skill special truck raced by with the Doppler effect

distorting its siren. It was yet another noisy day in the city. The roadside displays and electronic bulletin boards were playing a news story about a helmeted man attacking a general securities trading office and later escaping from an Anti-Skill station.

“Using all the large and small incidents that occur across Academy City.”

“Are you saying that’s part of it?”

“All crimes have a cause, no matter how ridiculous it might be. And if it seems to happen unnaturally smoothly, it is best to assume a third party is influencing it. If you put in the effort to find multiple sources, a single search engine can distinguish between such things.”

But after Aleister readily stated that…

“However. How much of that is sharp intuition and how much of it is paranoid delusion? Maintaining that line is not easy. To keep that line clear, you need an impartial point of view. It is not that I dislike Misaka Mikoto or Shokuhou Misaki. In fact, the more people providing their opinion, the more your individual biases are diluted and the less likely you are to be trapped by prejudice or preconception. But before accepting someone into our group, we must first prove their safety. And that is where this litmus test comes in. I used to let my question-and-answer AI handle such things, but you will fill that role now. …And since we have seriously tried to kill each other based on our incompatible principles and beliefs, I know you will be able to supply a view counter to my own.”

“…”

No matter how many failures, losses, or setbacks she experienced, she would not stop.

She would even make use of the connections made when everything fell apart around her.

“Now, let’s go grab some insurance like always. The first key is Tsuchimikado Motoharu. Let’s cause something of a commotion to grab his attention. There is no need to take this too seriously. It only needs to be a small sign of our presence that a normal person would overlook.”

“So where are we going now…?”

By then, Kamijou Touma may have been nearly swallowed up by it.

He should have been giving a yes or no answer, but he skipped straight past that and asked where.

And that was why this happened.

They visited a steamy sauna that was still open late at night.

“……
……Are you completely insane?”

“I have a towel firmly wrapped around my waist, so I’m not sure what more I can do. Then again, I am used to being seen as a villain, so go right ahead. Savor the soft skin, warmth, and aroma of a maiden.”

“But why are you in the men’s sauna!?”

“Oh, should I have gone to the women’s one?”

…Since she was a dirty old man on the inside, that seemed like a problem too.

However, she looked like a fragilely-slender silver-haired girl wearing only a towel. Even this late, there were a few other

customers here and there, but all of them were completely flustered. …And yet none of them raised their voice or drove her out. Yes, the men were not about to complain when a girl marched on in with them.

(The other customers were actually just as overwhelmed by the sight of Kamijou whose wounds were only roughly covered by some gauze, but) Aleister gave a curious glance to the small waterproof television another customer had brought with them.

“Hmm, that’s an idea. If we carefully check over the information on traffic congestion, we might gain a general picture of what caused that congestion. And if it is significant, we can pursue it.”

“You keep jumping onto new ideas. Are you only acting clever and you’re actually stumped? Was visiting this sauna only meant to delay coming clean about that!?”

“What’s this? If you’re feeling restless, how about we play a game? Like strip rock-paper-scissors.”

“That’d be a sudden death match!! We both only have one thing to remove!!”

Aleister sat on the paulownia bench like she owned the place and boldly crossed her legs with no concern for what that meant for the towel.

“You sit down too. Didn’t I tell you we would be leaving a sign? I’ve created a topic that ranks above the standard threshold, so word should soon spread across social media. And everyone sharing it will think it’s entirely unimportant and laughable. Only those who know the crucial fact that the Board Chairman has become a silver-haired girl will realize its importance.”

“Are you *sure* you planned all this out?”

“Well, since I am defenselessly exposing my skin, there is a risk of an unpleasant third party contacting us. But if that happens, I only need to remove this towel and scream at the top of my lungs. When I announce that everyone here is a witness, they will fall into an unprecedented level of panic, giving us time to slip away and go elsewhere.”

Was the situation really worth making that kind of gamble?

Kamijou could not seem to relax until the usual gang had been gathered.

“In all likelihood, that will not happen.” Aleister’s well-featured face and neck had grown somewhat flushed. “And the incident started by Coronzon is a matter separate from our actions here. We must start by contacting and regrouping with the others to bring us back on track. And the easiest way to do that is to cast aside the fixed viewpoint of ‘Kamijou Touma’s story’.”

“?”

“Some things in this world seem quite similar but are entirely different. For example, professional wrestling uses safe pinning techniques developed from circus acts, so it would be useless for an obsessed fan of that to discuss a wrestling match in an international tournament where the contestants are truly struggling for victory. *Having some small knowledge can actually lead you astray.* That is what I am talking about. Although enacting an idea this ridiculous is sure to help reset your worldview.”

“What are you trying to say?”

She answered with a straight face.

“A pink wind shall save the world.”

“Okay, that’s it. Clench your teeth because Lilith in heaven is demanding a Round 2!!”

Part 4

He could not rely on Anti-Skill.

But he could not leave a baby out in the December cold either.

It was fairly unusual for shelter to be the most important of the survival necessities, but the cold was Lilith’s greatest enemy at the moment. They needed some kind of shelter before thinking about anything else.

That was why Hamazura Shiage made a certain decision while trailing a blue light.

“This place should work.”

On Aneri’s instructions, he broke through the glass door’s lock like he was solving a puzzle ring and then he snuck in. The sweet scent of flowers immediately pushed in at him like a solid wall.

(It’s still around 8, but I guess public facilities close early.)

This was a botanical garden.

…Perhaps because it was a public facility, its Christmas lights were still on after all the guests had left. He knew you had to be careful with light sources when growing plants and flowers that used photosynthesis, so would those decorative lights really not cause any kind of problem?

It was enclosed by a large glass dome shaped like half a soccer ball. The delicate sections for things like high elevation plants were probably carefully temperature controlled instead of tended to by hand, so unlike a zoo or aquarium, it was difficult for problems to develop with the sterile environment. If he used this as a base, Lilith would at least not freeze to death.

Identical posters were plastered all over the place, but that was probably because this was being used as the location for a web-broadcast drama. Its release had been delayed a fair bit due to the heat wave, but he was pretty sure it was about several Killer Demons attacking each other with their respective methods of killing.

The baby groaned in his arms.

She had apparently not yet developed a love of flowers. Based on her displeased tone, she may not have liked the strong aroma. … Hamazura slammed shut the door of his heart before he was overwhelmed by the nightmarish memories of choosing this as the location for a date and doing a wonderful job of boring the track suit girl.

Yes, flowers produced neither light nor sound.

They did not move much, so there was not much you could do if someone said they were bored. There was no way to recover.

“Now, then… Aneri, pull up some footage from the nursery.”

The botanical garden would manage the temperature, so now he wanted to gather the supplies a baby would need. The Anti-Skill station’s nursery was the perfect example. He wanted to reproduce as many of the things seen there as possible.

(I guess a crib would come first.)

An unpleasant *chill* ran down his spine.

It sounded cute and all, but there was still some risk.

Some of the plants apparently needed more than the air-conditioning system's heat, so a soft and silky cloth was wrapped around a few of them. He checked in the storeroom and found a few bundles of that cloth. He pulled them out and prepared a bed for Lilith. Chemicals and allergens could be a problem and the handmade structure would be useless if some wires or the points of screws were sticking out.

Luckily, he had a magic word for that.

"Aneri, help me out."

He needed certainty right now. If his adolescent pride was going to get in the way, he had to discard it.

He arranged several gardening tools as if fitting them into the guide silhouettes that appeared directly in his vision. When Lilith started sounding bored, Aneri played a lullaby created with an automatic song-creation program to soothe her while Hamazura completed his construction work. It was not easy since he did not use any glue out of fear of harmful chemicals, but the way the wood fit complexly together like parquetry actually increased its durability.

The crib was complete.

He pressed on it a few times to test its overall strength and then gently placed Lilith in it. It showed no sign of collapsing. She must have liked the soft sensation because she clapped her small hands in joy.

He finally breathed a sigh of relief.

However, she was a living being, so this was not enough. Shelter

was not the only basic necessity. However, he could not use a normal store when he was dressed the same as a wanted criminal and he had been burned when trying an online store before.

He had to come up with some other way.

He entered the guard room which had no real purpose anymore now that the security was automated and he found a few radios placed inside chargers.

(Perfect. I can take one for myself and place another next to Lilith's crib)

Part 5

The luxury apartment was honestly a little too big just for living with her boyfriend, but Mugino and Kinuhata had stubbornly insisted they get one of this size. It was supposed to have been just the two of them, but at some point, those other two girls had essentially moved in with them.

"Nn."

It was currently nine at night.

(There's always so much fatty food during December. That Santa outfit fits perfectly now, so I'm a little worried about later on…)

It was not that the track suit girl had suddenly gained a desire to dress sexily. There was actually a sad story behind it where Kinuhata ordered it online as a joke, found the chest was far baggier than she expected, and could not possibly wear it. But no matter how it had started, it may have been best to smile and

watch over her as she took a large step forward by showing any interest at all in something other than a track suit.



While Takitsubo Rikou was in the changing room and working at some unfamiliar ab exercises in nothing but panties and a towel, her smartphone rang. The phone was sitting on top of the washing machine and set to vibrate, so it slid over and then fell right on top of her head.

She checked the screen and saw the call was from “Public Phone”.

This had happened earlier, so even absentminded Takitsubo could guess what it was about.

“What?”

“It’s me. Hamazura.”

“…”

“Yes, yes. I just have to prove it, right!? You seem to be working hard on your abs, but you don’t have to worry about that. With such a wonderful cup size, your chest alone adds an extra kilogram or two. So you don’t need to strip naked and despair over the reading on the scale every day. It’s just the natural way of things!!”

“Understood. Real or not, I’m on my way to murder you!!”

“Good, glad to see my love got through to you. I’ll pay you back later, so can you…hm, it’s past nine. The department stores and drugstores are probably closing soon. Oh, I know. Just to be certain, can you head to a 24-hour discount store and buy the things I need? I wouldn’t have to ask this of you if I could’ve accepted the things I ordered online earlier, but now I have to buy it all twice!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Um, I need diapers, baby powder, a baby bottle, powdered milk, some soft water bottles…um, they apparently have ones for babies, so get those. Also, a container and chemicals for sterilization by

boiling! Damn, just check the recommendations on an online store and throw it all in your cart. Get lots of water!”

“? ???”

“Leave it all at the payphone next to the Car Holder coin-operated parking lot south of District 7’s Leaf Street. Just leave the bag of stuff inside the phone booth. Oh, and we don’t actually have to see each other, since I doubt that would end well. Once you leave the products, just go home! Bye!!”

He hung up on her.

Takitsubo stared at her smartphone for a while, tilted her head, and then voiced her question.

“Diapers and a baby bottle…?”

She shut her eyes and then rubbed her index finger against her temple.

“Wh-what is Hamazura trying to get me to do?”

Part 6

Kamijou Touma had thought it would be over once they worked up a sweat in the sauna and washed off in the shower, but he had yet to see the bottom of this rabbit hole.

“Aren’t internet cafes exciting? The booths are so much more cramped and packed together than a karaoke box, but they’re only divided by a single thin partition and you can hear everything from the other ones. And when you stuff two people into a single-person

booth like this, it feels even more cramped."

"I have holes in my body, so quit pushing on me like that. My blood is gonna squirt out like you're squeezing a juice box! I've had enough of your observations on life and, come to think of it, you wrote erotica in the past, didn't you!?"

"Quit complaining. I wanted to use a video booth, but I compromised with this because you insisted."

Their conversation was accompanied by the clicking of a mouse.

"Even after showing off so much skin, Tsuchimikado never showed. It's about time to seriously consider the possibility that something is blocking our scent, but that means we will have to be more proactive."

"…"

"Yes, that's right. Tsuchimikado. Something was bothering me about him, but it wasn't about what happened in the Windowless Building. How did he reach me in that final moment in the back alley? No, reaching me may not have been his original goal there."

Kamijou did not want the conversation to turn toward Tsuchimikado since it could bring back memories of when that boy supposedly shot Aleister in the head. He did not want a conflict between allies at this point.

"Well, that does not matter now. If we cannot find Tsuchimikado, the next best bet would be Misaka Mikoto."

"?"

"That girl has a bad habit of deactivating electronic cameras and sensors when she moves around. But that means we only have to focus on the areas where the security is malfunctioning. …It is far

from a surefire method since nothing will rise to surface unless she is taking some kind of special action, but, well, the #3 has a short temper, so she is probably causing some kind of trouble somewhere."

"You really shouldn't let her hear you say that."

Kamijou was sitting in a less-than-comfortable and somewhat fuzzy office chair and the silver-haired girl who smelled of sap sat on his lap while working at a search engine decorated with Santa and snowmen.

"If this isn't enough to find her, we might be able to walk around the city with an old handheld radio hanging from our neck. The pattern, strength, and direction of the noise might be enough to calculate out the #3's location."

An amateur like Kamijou could not tell at all whether she was having any success, so he just honestly asked.

"…Have you figured anything out?"

"They must have prioritized the life infrastructure because the information networks like this have yet to recover. Well, *the normal internet* is hooked up at least."

Aleister shifted her small butt back and forth (in Kamijou's lap) to find the most comfortable position.

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to prepare some insurance here."

"?"

"Since I have access to a computer, it wouldn't be a bad idea to rewrite a bit of code."

Aleister pulled out the kind of stamp-sized flash memory card used

in digital cameras and stuck it into the computer's slot. She opened a new window and began rapidly typing, but everything she typed seemed to be English and numbers. Kamijou was not all that great at math or English, so he could not make any sense of it.

And the silver-haired girl showed no particular interest in explaining.

"Also, I now have a general understanding of the incidents occurring in the city. I was afraid they would all be drowned out by the Windowless Building blasting off, but the normal news is still being reported."

"And you said Coronzon is using that kind of thing?"

"There were several headlines, but none of them were of much importance. However, this one was reported without a clear explanation for the reasons behind it: the entire series of events following an attack on a general securities trading office. I also happen to recognize the equipment being used: the Processor Suit."

"This thing? Is it some kind of incredible new weapon?"

"No. For one thing, it has no set shape or size."

The silver-haired girl leaned back against Kamijou, the soap smell reached him from the back of her head, and she answered in a way that told him she probably did not plan on explaining further. She simply wanted ideas counter to her own opinions, not mutual understanding.

Then she changed the subject to an almost impressive degree.

"Let's go over what Coronzon is."

"You mean that demon?"

“I went to Africa in 1909 and performed a summoning experiment. The whole honorable poverty idea from the Loch Ness experiment didn’t really suit me, so I used the blood of three doves to create a circle that would have an immediate effect. Of the 30 angels, the 10th is Zax, also known as Coronzon. Its true essence is the number 333, it prevents a true bonding with the laws of the world, and thus its true meaning is dispersion. It appears to assist you and to be the key needed to cross the abyss, but it is actually a great demon that spreads all forms of pollution and atrocities throughout the world from the one who contacted it. …Hah. A great demon, hm? Such a simple term that provides an accurate image to even the greatest fool, regardless of their knowledge or education. Which is perfect for Coronzon.”

“So what happened?”

“Nothing. It was fortunate I was using an apprentice as a breaker. My body was temporarily hijacked as an avatar, but Victor Neuburg functioned perfectly and successfully drove Coronzon away. … Although looking back, it seems 1909 was not the first summoning and it had been targeting me with intent to harm me as a memento from Mathers.”

Aleister laughed and rested her young body weight on Kamijou.

Her arms could no longer reach, so she stretched out a foot and rudely operated the mouse with the sole and toes of her kneesock. And she of course showed no concern for what this meant for her short skirt.

“Coronzon has gathered great knowledge in the depths of the abyss, but she also seems interested in the human techniques that people like Mathers and I have developed. Look at this.”

The screen displayed a video sharing site.

The oddly tall and narrow footage seemed to be from a cellphone and it was almost entirely black and very blurry. Occasional static ran through it and the entire video occasionally lagged and skipped. It was bad enough to suspect the file itself was damaged.

But something could be seen lurking in that darkness.

It looked like a young girl but also not like one. What was it?

“A Mimetic Predator, hm? She is holding out quite well. England, Rome, and Russia should complete the data destruction before long, so I am impressed she has not forgotten her primary task with that external war to worry about.”

“…The magic side is a part of all this?”

“That division is no more than a line I drew using the Archetype Controller. There is no actual distinction between science incidents and magic incidents, so that is no more than a mere monster lurking in the shadows. Although if you are the type to stubbornly insist on measuring things in millibars or yukawas, I won’t stop you.”

Her one leg must have gotten tired because the silver-haired girl reached her other leg up onto the desk as well. She wrapped both her feet around the mouse before continuing.

“It’s the same as the Loch Ness experiment. Although this seems intentionally set up to fail.”

And that of course pressed her soft body weight even further against Kamijou.

“You seem like the type that would easily fall for this bait, so let me warn you up front: If you see something similar in the city, do not approach. I had no interest in observing the progress at the time,

but if the third-rate newspapers are to be believed, its strength surpasses that of your average dinosaur.”

Part 7

Yes, as long as he used the phone, Hamazura could communicate with people.

As long as no one saw his “face”, there would be no trouble. So once Takitsubo had left the requested products, he could come and collect them to complete the handoff.

“So. What are you doing here, Hamazura?”

Except that absentminded girl suddenly ruined the entire plan.

He had waited a full half hour after the designated time to make extra certain they would not meet, but Takitsubo Rikou could put a lot of effort into the weirdest things. He saw half her face poking out from a row of vending machines that glowed with Christmas-colored lights. She had apparently waited for half an hour out in the cold.

And Hamazura Shiage began shadow boxing for no real reason. The gaps in the Processor Suit’s armor were still fully blue.

“Are you stupid!? Why would you stray from the plan!? And where are Mugino and Kinuhata!? If those monsters who run the underground are here, then bring them on!!”

“Shift down your mental gear, Hamazura.”

“You idiot, I’ve got to risk my life to escape those members of a

pure combat species that can't seem to fit into civilized society! I swear, there's nothing worse than a battle with cute girls where you fight and fight and there's never any clothing damage! All that leaves is the fact that they're unfairly strong! So I protest! I won't accept any rules other than defining the one to strip first as the winner!!!!!"

But a question reached the dumb delinquent's panicked mind.

Yes, Takitsubo kept calling him Hamazura.

"…What is the meaning of this, Takitsubo-san?"

"It's true I can't see your face, but I can see these fruitless actions, that hunched-over gait of poverty itself, and the loser signals emanating from you… Yes, only Hamazura could be behind that mask…"

"If I didn't have the tough mind of the world-famous End of the Century Emperor, I probably would've gone and killed myself after hearing that!!"

"Hamazura!!"

"Don't let that reaction convince you! That's not who I am!!"

Hamazura tried to hold back the busty Santa (with kneesocks and exposed midriff) who was quite jiggly when running over and embracing him. But the excited girl would not let him redo this or go through another loop. Adolescence was all about one-time chances!

(Anyway, digitize and record this sensation, Aneri! And no, this isn't about my personal interests! This is sure to benefit the human race! It'll cause a revolution in the VR industry!!)

But the support AI did not respond. Perhaps because he had

wasted this one-time adolescent chance by heading full speed in a dumb direction.

Now that she had identified him from his walking pattern and the way he carried himself (and some kind of mystery signal), Takitsubo spoke to him like a friend.

“Well, Hamazura? What is going on here?”

“Y-yeah. Do you promise Mugino and Kinuhata aren’t here? Those warrior girls who don’t understand human language aren’t spying on us from somewhere? Then I guess I have time to explain.”

“Why did you suddenly ask me to buy diapers and a baby bottle? … Hamazura, you haven’t developed a weird new fetish, have you?”

“Wait, so you didn’t understand me at all!? There were as many options as there are stars in the sky, so why would you ever choose that one!? Are you some kind of veteran agent who always assumes the worst and acts with extreme caution!?”

At any rate, even if he had not cleared his name from this new charge of perversion, he was glad to have someone he knew treating him like Hamazura Shiage.

When he asked Aneri to list out his options here, he was only given terrible ones like throwing his fist into the center of Takitsubo’s chest, so he swept Takitsubo’s feet out from under her and princess carried her.

For some reason, an unrecommended action alert blared, but he had the kneesocks miniskirt Santa carry the shopping bag of baby goods like an otter, kicked off a building wall to reach the neighboring roof, and then began jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

“? Hamazura, you seem to be touching my butt.”

“Blame your short skirt. We’re taking a stroll through the air, so if I wasn’t holding it down, everyone below us could see. See those red panties, that is.”

“Why do you know that!? When did you see them!?”

“You really went the extra mile to make sure those matched.”

He was hit by a cute barrage of fists along the way, but that was not a problem thanks to the Processor Suit’s armor.

With the bright Christmas lights below them, the stars were drowned out and the sky seemed wrapped in pitch black. While leaping from darkness to darkness in a reserved but cool fashion, Hamazura began to speak.

“There’s one thing I have to warn you about up front: A. O. Francisca. There’s someone else wearing another one of these Processor Suits, so you can’t just trust this appearance. Oh, I know. See this scar on the back of the hand? Use that to determine if it’s me or not. If you don’t see that or they run in a weird way, then they’re a fake.”

“Hm?”

“It may be an issue of volume, but their equipment seems good at transforming into human kids. So in your case, watch out for little boys. Don’t you give them a sweet look. Be on your guard!”

“…Hamazura, what kind of person do you think I am?”

She glared at him, but he could not help but worry for his girlfriend. That was just how he worked.

“Anyway, what are you doing, Hamazura?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, but I’ll tell you what little I do know. I

suddenly found myself in this weird suit, I was chased around the city, and now I'm being chased by some guy in an identical Processor Suit. Framing me for some crime apparently wasn't enough for them. …I thought I was being pursued in their place, but cutting off the lizard's tail apparently wasn't the end of it."

Perhaps due to the attack on the Central Anti-Skill Station, emergency vehicles were driving in the canyon between buildings with their red lights ruining the December illumination art. Hamazura…or really, "a man in a Processor Suit" was still a wanted criminal, but Anti-Skill apparently was not focused on the rooftops.

If he could do this, so could A. O. Francisca. He could not view this too positively, so he had to be careful.

"There are two things we need to know," said Takitsubo as he held her. "First, what is that Processor Suit man named A. O. Francisca trying to do? Second, you said the #1 is pursuing this incident separate from Anti-Skill, so where is he getting his information and why is he pursuing it?"

"…Pretty much, yeah."

"A. O. Ay, oh… I wonder what that means. Alpha and omega?"

"What's that? It sounds kinda familiar… Is it a weapon in a game or something?"

"Francisca is the weapon. It's a throwing axe from Europe and I think it was used by the Franks who were active toward the end of the Roman period. Hmm, come to think of it, there's a missile known as a tomahawk, isn't there? That seems kind of like a hint and kind of like it only makes everything more confusing."

The mysterious Processor Suit was not the wanted criminal's only trump card. Hamazura had also seen him work alongside a strange

organism weapon.

He decided to work from the assumption that A. O. Francisca and Accelerator had been enemies from the beginning and the wanted criminal had put another Processor Suit on Hamazura as a decoy to distract the pursuing #1.

That seemed to make sense at first, but it fell apart with the attack on the Central Anti-Skill Station. Hamazura had been caught as “the person inside the weird suit”, so Anti-Skill and Accelerator would both have been focused on him. Attacking the strictly-guarded building to finish off Hamazura would only reveal that Hamazura was not the real one.

“Or…”

“?”

“Maybe it began that way. Maybe I was only meant to be disposed as bait. But something A. O. Francisca didn’t expect happened, so their plan fell apart and they had to make an appearance. …Could that be it?”

But in that case, there would have to be something other than Hamazura or the Processor Suit that had changed everything for A. O. Francisca. What else had been in that Central Anti-Skill Station? If the wanted criminal and the #1 had been enemies to begin with, what had they been fighting over?

It would have to be something Hamazura had picked up along the way.

It would have to be valuable enough for that wanted criminal to return to their decoy after having supposedly escaped.

If their goal was to recover or destroy that thing…what was it?

He thought about it and only one possibility came to mind.

It was something he had only picked up by coincidence with no intent behind it whatsoever. But it might have some great meaning for those extraordinary monsters. Back in the Central Anti-Skill Station, those two had ultimately clashed in the nursery. What if that was not a mere coincidence?

“But if you’re wearing a Processor Suit, I guess it’s the same either way. This shouldn’t be boring at least.”

An unpleasant *chill* ran down his spine.

“So does this mean you’re the parent?”

He did not know why he recalled those words.

But Hamazura Shiage was now convinced enough to speak the name of the individual at the center of this.

“Is it…*Lilith*?”

There was not much he knew about her. He did not even know who had left her in that abandoned car’s trunk in that back alley. It was possible he had picked up an incredibly valuable golden egg without realizing it. Did she have some unheard of talent or antibodies for a deadly disease?

Academy City’s #1 had been in the same area.

Had he been planning to search out that “hiding spot” at his leisure after driving off anyone who might interfere?

“Hamazura. You might have found an answer, but you need to explain it to me too.”

“Hm? Well, if my thoughts won’t just confuse you…”

While he explained his prediction at length, he carried Takitsubo back to the Christmas-decorated botanical garden. Once they arrived, he heard a baby crying quite loudly inside the reinforced glass of the facility.

Hamazura had actually already heard the crying since he had a connection to the crib using the radios he had borrowed from the guard room, but he was not all that worried. After spending some time with her, he had learned that babies had different kinds of crying. And the most frightening thing was when they stopped crying, as if their throat was clogged. If she was crying nice and loud, it was not a signal of danger.

“And after I made sure to make her a bunch of toys that hang from the ceiling and spin around or that make sounds when you touch them.”

He gently lowered the Santa costume and green ribbon girl to the ground and then approached the crib. Lilith’s crying immediately stopped. She instead made a begging noise.

And when he picked her up, she immediately smiled.

“? ??? So you didn’t actually want anything? Do you just cry and smile for no real reason?”

“Hamazura, you have a critical lack of understanding of a girl’s heart.”

For some reason, Takitsubo gave him a cold look as she set down the shopping bag full of baby products.

Then she peered at the baby he was holding.

“She’s so cute.”

“Really? You can’t tell the gender of a baby just by looking at them

and they all seem to look the same to me. Plus, the way they crumple up their face looks like a monkey."

"……
……A critical lack of understanding."

Hamazura Shiage's meter was draining fast, but it seemed not even Aneri could give AI relationship advice like something from a marriage counseling site. In fact, the recommended routes he was given all included things like axe kicks and suplexes. He could not blame the program since it had been made by human hands, but he could only classify it as a meathead combat species. The thought processes were far too simple, so everything came down to winning and losing and the greatest destructive power was always considered the winner. As an experienced user, Hamazura gently brushed the suggestions aside like he was seeing a comedian with a muscleman shtick. Yes, Aneri was not a bad person. Not at all.

"Does she need some milk?"

"She apparently had some at the nursery, so she should be fine for a while."

"What about her diaper?"

"I don't smell anything and she'll cry a lot if she does need it."

"…Uuh."

The baby talk had infected his girlfriend.

Even if he could rely on Aneri, he did not want this untranslatable language to spread too far, but what did this mean?

"I want to do something," she said.

“If you say so, but no matter what we try to force on her, the baby will just cry. Lilith will generally get our attention if she wants anything.”

Hamazura lowered the baby into the handmade crib and she made a somewhat displeased noise. She apparently did not want to sleep right now. She waved around her red and yellow trumpet toy, put it in her mouth, and tooted it at him.

It was possible the wanted criminal and the #1 were fighting over this baby.

That bothered him, but he had no way of finding out more right away.

This was not a medical facility, so he could not start to discuss the structure of Lilith’s brain or her genetic makeup.

The only curious thing he could see with the naked eye was the tag around her wrist. That was not much information, but it felt like a clue that would connect her to her parents. It meant this baby was not some illusion that had suddenly appeared out of thin air. She was a lifeform supported by a history leading back into the past.

“If she has a tag, then she was looked after by a hospital, right? Does that mean she probably wasn’t born in a public bathroom and then abandoned?”

Figuring out what hospital used that tag might be an important hint. But how would he do that? You could search anything that caught your interest in this age, but he had been burned when he tried to use the internet earlier. He could only use this place for one night since the employees would show up in the morning, but he did not want to lose the bed he had finally prepared for Lilith. The botanical garden had a terminal for looking up the names of flowers, but he wanted to avoid using it.

However, Takitsubo said something odd.

“But about that tag. What is it made from?”

“Huh? Isn’t it plastic or polyvinyl whatever?”

“I don’t think so.”

She immediately rejected his ideas.

Hamazura gave a doubtful look behind his helmet, but the miniskirt Santa reached into the crib.

She removed the cheap tag from that small hand and pulled out the water-boiling kit she had bought for sterilizing the baby bottle. But she did not pour any water in. She used the heating element without any water inside and then tossed the tag in.

It was not that anything happened.

Quite the opposite. Even when exposed to more heat than a car’s cigarette lighter, it showed no sign of melting or discoloring. Nor did it burn or produce any kind of smoke or odor. Even a silicone tajine pot meant for use in a microwave would have discolored somewhat. That fact that this did not change at all felt like encountering a bizarre phenomenon.

Takitsubo’s expression had not changed.

Hamazura was apparently the only one surprised by this.

“I doubt this would change even if we directly heated it on a gas burner. It looks flimsy, but it isn’t simple plastic or vinyl.”

“…Then what is this thing…?”

They had found a mystery object, like a small chip an alien had

embedded in someone's head. A baby had been abandoned with a tag of unknown material around her wrist. What had happened to Lilith?

This entirely changed his view of Lilith whose existence he had proven using that tag.

Takitsubo switched off the boiling container, flipped it upside down, and shook the tag out. It was still hot, so they did not immediately return it to Lilith's wrist. They wrapped a towel around it and waited for it to cool.

"There is one thing we know," said Takitsubo.

"Yeah?"

"No matter how strange the situation is, Lilith hasn't done anything wrong."

"…That's right."

It sounded simple, but that was a point he could never lose sight of. If he let this distance him from her, he would be walking the same path as whoever had placed a baby in the trunk of an abandoned car and left her there. He would never let himself do that. He might not know what kind of person he wanted to be, but he knew that kind of person was something he never wanted to be. No matter how much people looked down on him and no matter how close he came to be crushed by self-loathing and self-contradiction on a daily basis, that dumb delinquent lived by his dumb delinquent pride.

He heard an energetic voice from the baby.

Since they had been discussing the tag, she apparently wanted their attention again. When he knew what she wanted, responding

was easy.

“We can’t have her crying through the night,” he said. “So let’s play with her until she’s all worn out.”

“I’ll do it. What should I do?”

Takitsubo pulled a plastic bell and a toy castanet from the shopping bag and gave a snort. This was an unnecessary task. They would not be punished if they did not do it and they would not be paid any kind of bonus for doing it well. But the girl in a midriff-baring Santa outfit with kneesocks leaned eagerly forward and said she would do it. Hamazura’s shoulders relaxed as he watched through his helmet.

This was good.

This was how the world should be.

No matter Lilith’s origins, she had had the horrific experience of being in an abandoned car’s trunk.

So they would not let her day end on that terrible note.

This had nothing to do with their ranking in the esper development or with winning a fight. This child had unfairly experienced all sorts of misfortune based on someone else’s decision, so they had to show her the world could also be a kind place. If they did not use the positive to cancel out the negative and make this a good day overall, they could not accept tomorrow.

If he could not do that much, Hamazura Shiage would be unable to call himself human.

Part 8

“Y’know…I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen someone get kicked out of an internet cafe. It’s like seeing a samurai with a topknot living in modern Japan.”

“A valuable experience then, wouldn’t you say?”

“None of that was a compliment! You were bouncing up and down on top of me so much that the chair fell back and we knocked over the partition!”

“Sorry, I just got a little overexcited when I saw they had begun putting together a new ascent route for the K2 in the short time since I last checked. I do feel somewhat bad.”

“Oh, yeah. You are a mountain climber, aren’t you? But that aside, where are we now!?”

“You can’t tell? This is a capsule hotel. Since I’ve finally come out into the city, I want to try everything I can.”

“Why!?”

“We ultimately failed to regroup with magical Tsuchimikado Motoharu or scientific Misaka Mikoto. What barrier stands in our way? What is suspicious and who would be able to do it? We need to assume there is something to this.”

“?”

“Is the way you give up on thinking and seek an answer from me a sign of your trust in me? Anyway, I have seen what is suspicious. And I am sure its outlines will grow more apparent to you as time passes.”

She made it sound like common knowledge, but the spiky-haired boy who lived a perfectly normal high school life had never visited such a facility.

It was located in one corner of a multi-tenant building. One wall was covered in human lockers that were only a bit better than the morgue in a police drama. They were of course horribly uncomfortable, but it took it to such an extreme that it actually felt like something out of science fiction.

And Kamijou was fairly certain a young boy and girl were not meant to share a single one together. He could not help but fear his wounds would reopen.

“Wait, we can’t do this. Two people puts this thing at 200% capacity and there’s no good reason to cram us both in there like a train during rush hour. Wow, and why does this dirty old man smell like soap and feel so warm!?”

“Worry not. Half of that smell is from you.”

“That’s not any better! It’s like smelling your own fart in a sealed space…!!”

People pounded on the walls from every direction. That was apparently a warning to at least keep their flirting quiet.

Kamijou was half in tears when his only option was to hold the silver-haired girl in his arms. If he desperately insisted this was all a misunderstanding, the world would only see it as disturbing people’s sleep.

Aleister spoke quietly like a parent reading a bedtime story.

“Well, using the internet cafe computer meant a lot. It gave me one more piece of insurance in case I need it.”

“What kind of insurance?”

“A computer virus. You like those simple terms over a more specific classification like malware or worm, right? Simple terms like Holy Guardian Angel.”

Aleister pressed her cheek to his chest and, in something like a magic trick, revealed a stamp-sized flash memory card between her fingers

“…What are you going to use that for…?”

“Insurance, like I said. It’s a relief to have it on hand, but you would prefer not to use it. This thing is so heinous that the many cyber attacks that Misaka Mikoto once made on the clone experiments pale in comparison.”

Kamijou decided he should really confiscate that from her, but the small size of the flash memory card worked against him. After they grabbed it back and forth for a while, she ultimately stuck it in a truly unbelievable place that prevented him from reaching for it. That isn’t much of explanation, you say? That’s because I can’t put the specifics here, dammit.

This was someone who been known as senseless since the 1800s yet never let it get to them.

“Anyway, I have a general plan now.”

“?”

“To be honest, I knew an incident on this scale would have some involvement from the seven Level 5s…and since it has connections to the dark side, it would probably be the #1, #2, or #4. No matter how much they try to deny it, it is obvious they are working to clean up this city. So if they are involved in this, in would be in a

passive role. Just as firefighters head to a building because it is on fire, they would not be involved in the initial cause of the fire."

"It looked like you were just watching online videos the whole time. What is that going to tell you?"

"If I could only use Underline, I wouldn't have had to manually work through all those files that could be deleted at any moment." A soapy scent scattered from the bottom of the girl's silver hair. "And not even the greatest monster exists solely as an individual. The Level 5 would have stepped out onto the game board of their own free will. So what was it that pushed them to act? If I can determine the trigger from their relationship diagram, the true central figure should come into view."

While held in Kamijou's arms, small Aleister placed her slender palm on his chest.

And she whispered sweetly like a serpent recommending an apple.

"Now, who was it that appeared on the board? Yomikawa Aiho belongs to the District 7 Central Anti-Skill Station, but Accelerator's involvement was confirmed before the attack on the station. Then is it Last Order, Yoshikawa Kikyou, or Misaka Worst? That is still not clear to me."

"What? Don't tell me your answer is going to be 'I don't know what I don't know'."

"Not even I am that conceited."

Aleister giggled.

Kamijou was holding her head near his chest, so warmth built up where their skin touched.

"Next, let us switch viewpoints and focus on the #4. The

relationship diagram here is even simpler. And what appear to have been Kinuhata Saiai and Takitsubo Rikou were seen at ticket gate B4 of District 7's southern station. That would be near the turtle statue. Mugino Shizuri's relationships are almost entirely carried over from the former members of Item. The one exception is Fremea Seivelun, sister of Frenda Seivelun."

"…I'm not really sure what Item is, but you said there was an exception, right? Aren't there two branches there?"

"No. If Fremea was at risk, the #2 would act. …Well, the autonomous Dark Matter that split off from the original would. But there is no sign of that. That means the Level 5s were not called in by Fremea or by Kuroyoru Umidori and Fräulein Kreutune who branch off from there."

"Hm? Hmm??? Hold on. Doesn't that mean you've eliminated all the candidates?"

"My, aren't we insensitive."

With that, Aleister wrapped her slender legs around Kamijou's body as if in punishment. The magician spoke from close range like a snake carrying a sweet venom.

"Item was a four-person small-scale response team including Frenda who was killed on the job, but now the term also refers to a separate temporary worker of theirs."

Academy City's Board Chairman paused for just a moment.

And then he identified the person.

"Hamazura Shiage. He is likely at the center of this incident. Focus on him and something is bound to happen. We should see the next clue we should follow."

Part 9

It was late at night.

Lilith had been so full of energy, but once they actually began playing with her, she had fallen asleep unexpectedly quickly. According to Takitsubo, a baby's sleep balance was different from a normal person's. Like a cat, they would repeatedly switch between shallow sleep and wakefulness, so it was apparently not that difficult to get them to sleep. The problem was how frequently they woke back up.

With nothing more to do, Miniskirt Santa Takitsubo was curled up and asleep.

The only person awake in the building surrounded by reinforced glass was Hamazura decorated by a blue light. He would have had difficulty sleeping anyway with his life in danger and his girlfriend defenselessly sleeping next to him with no wall between them, but that was a moot point when he could not remove the special Processor Suit that he was still not accustomed to.

Aneri was obsessed with battling and focused on ability above all else, so whenever he asked for advice, he had to reject a suggestion that he could be given some pleasant sleep if an intentional short in the suit was used like a stun gun.

That left him to reflect on the events of the day like he was counting sheep.

(Who was that guy anyway?)

He was of course curious about Wanted Criminal A. O. Francisca who seemed to be the cause of all this.

(Is it someone I know? I mean, it is possible they just chose me on the spot like some kind of serial killer, but even if it was just on a whim, they couldn't choose someone they had never come in contact with before. Even the world's worst murderer only crawls around their own sphere of life and chooses victims from there, so they wouldn't choose someone from a country they've never heard of on the other side of the world.)

He ran into people on a daily basis in his life and could have earned someone's ire somewhere or other, but he could not think of anyone who could get their hands on this high-tech equipment and put together this "game".

He had initially thought this was the leaders of the city and it was related to the Parameter List, but it would be odd if he was just being disposed of on the sidelines of Lilith's story. He had only seen a hint of their cruelty and that had been more than enough for him. If they were taking this seriously, they would throw all their frustrations at him and have a thorough execution festival as part of Hamazura Shiage's story. Or so it seemed to him.

(Where was it?)

That was why another thought occurred to Hamazura.

Wasn't this whole incident oddly *shallow*? He did not need classified documents on some special incident or a forensic investigation kit here. Couldn't he figure something out just by digging through his memories?

(Where did I get involved with them? We only needed to pass each other by in the street. It can be as flimsy as can be, but there has to have been something that led them to choose me.)

For example, what had happened today?

He had to think about the time before he was placed in this weird Processor Suit. He opened the drawers of his memories from before the crisis. This would of course have to be something that occurred before it all began.

(Yes, that's right. I helped install that ATM starting in the morning, I used a small crane to unload the equipment since they didn't have anyone else who could, I ate a convenience store bento for lunch, it was a salmon meal since Mugino's tastes seem to have rubbed off on me, the site manager got mad at me for sitting on a block in the parking lot while I ate, and I was paid 15,000 yen for the day…)

He was not sure if he had found something or not.

Just like if someone had told him to compare two identical photos for differences, everything started to look kind of suspicious.

The answer might be obvious if he looked at it from a different angle, but he did not know what angle that was. Where had the culprit viewed him from?

And as he lost himself in possibly pointless and possibly crucial thought, something changed. It came from the crib Lilith was supposed to be sleeping in.

She was breathing in a way he had not heard before.

"What's going on!? Lilith, what's wrong!?"

Hamazura quickly got up and found himself speaking aloud even though he knew the baby could not answer him.

But he did get a response from the bare-midriff miniskirt Santa named Takitsubo Rikou who was curled up on the floor. She rubbed her eyes and slowly got up.

"Uuh, what is it, Hamazura?"

“Lilith’s acting weird. What is this? She didn’t swallow something, did she?”

“I don’t think I chose any toys small enough for that.”

She could tell he was serious about this when she heard Lilith’s breathing for herself. Takitsubo checked the baby’s face and then placed a hand on the tiny forehead.

“She has a fever. Her temperature is too high even for a baby. And yet she isn’t sweating at all…”

“Hold on. Isn’t that the worst combination?”

“It sounds like she’s having trouble breathing, so some phlegm or vomit might be clogging her throat. But it’s hard for an amateur like me to say.”

They were at the limit of what amateurs could do.

Then it was obvious what they had to rely on next.

“The hospital, hm?”

“But, Hamazura, that would be risky. The hospitals have a hotline to Anti-Skill, so they’ll report anything that looks remotely suspicious.”

The tension of death crept up on him again.

He recalled hearing that cavities and appendicitis could be deadly for a runaway criminal.

For the same reason, delinquent groups would leave a badly injured member in the hospital parking lot and then make a run for it. They wanted the help of the hospital, but they did not want to be arrested either. But Hamazura and Takitsubo could not just

leave Lilith there.

It was possible the wanted criminal and the #1 were targeting her.

They could not just leave her in a stranger's care and call it a day. If they could not continue protecting her, her life would still be at risk.

"Hamazura, do you know any unlicensed doctors from your old life?"

"Those doctors aren't all that great. At best, they had their medical license taken from them after making some kind of medical error. They're fine if you need a few stitches or a splint for a broken arm, but there's no way they have the specialized equipment or knowledge to take care of a small baby like this!"

Of course, it was possible this was nowhere near as serious as it looked. Then they would end up like a runaway criminal who got arrested after mistaking a simple hangover for a serious brain disease. But amateurs like them could not make that call. They had to assume the worst and act as if Lilith had little time.

It was time to make a decision.

So Hamazura Shiage spoke up.

"…Let's go to the hospital."

"Hamazura."

"It needs to have a pediatric department, so it has to be a fairly large general hospital. And while we're at it, a hospital we can trust would be nice. Yes, the one in District 7 with the frog-faced doctor is well-known, isn't it? That place should be accepting emergency patients this late, so if we can get her there…"

“Hamazura, are you aware of the risk that would place on you.”

“What else am I supposed to do!?” He sounded like he was cornered. “I’m causing someone trouble just by being here right now. I know that! But abandoning Lilith would be on an entirely different level. I’d be crossing a line! And I can’t do that!! I once got so caught up in protecting myself that I tried to kill someone’s parent. So it might sound silly for me to get all principled now, but this is a line I absolutely refuse to cross!!”

“…”

The midriff-baring Santa girl intentionally paused for a deep breath before speaking.

“…Understood. Then you stay here, Hamazura. I’ll take Lilith to the hospital.”

“No. Lilith’s information was already recorded at the Central Anti-Skill Station. They’ll have the basics like her name and picture, but also things like her fingerprints, retina scan, and shape of her teeth. Hell, knowing this city, they might have taken her DNA as well. And all that data will have reached all the related agencies over the network. Take Lilith there and you’ll be a wanted criminal too. I won’t let that happen. We can still limit the number of people being pursued, Takitsubo, so this isn’t the job for you. I’m already being pursued, so only I have to head out there!!”

“You’ll be trapped, Hamazura…”

“I know. That’s why we can’t screw this up. Listen, I’m not placing you or Lilith on this sinking ship. This is my ship and only I need to sink on it.”

“…”

“I’ll take Lilith to the hospital, so you hurry back to the apartment and wake up Mugino and Kinuhata. This is the same as when the Central Anti-Skill Station was attacked. I can’t imagine how they’re intercepting the information, but if my name shows up on the public agencies’ network, I think A. O. Francisca and the #1 will be there to target Lilith. The civilian hospital’s guards won’t stand a chance. Takitsubo, you’re not a suspect, so you and the others guard Lilith in secret. It’ll be a Level 5 against a Level 5. Then we’ll finally have some hope. We don’t have to fully defeat those monsters. We just have to get Lilith examined at the hospital and then get her somewhere safe.”

“What will you do, Hamazura?”

“I’ll figure something out after I’ve been arrested. Don’t worry. They might not find me completely innocent at this point, but I haven’t committed any major crimes. It isn’t worth letting someone die over.”

Takitsubo shook her head like a small child.

Hamazura’s weak heart was just about swayed despite the situation, but he held strong. It was easy to let go of the person dangling from the precipice, but what would happen to that person? Lilith had already experienced it once while abandoned in that trunk below the frigid sky. He could not force that sort of unfairness on her again.

Hamazura felt that he had been the same. The details were different, but he had been abandoned by society. And he only had a life now because someone had taken him in.

He would not let Lilith’s life end while derailed like this. He would return her to the proper path.

It would probably be best to act before his resolution faded.

The dumb delinquent gently picked Lilith up while she groaned in agony on the crib.

“…I’ll be going.”

“Hamazura.”

“Please do what I asked you to. We can only save Lilith’s life if we all work together.”

However.

The situation did not wait around for his decision here.

The Processor Suit’s accent color switched from blue to yellow.

And the entire botanical garden building shook like a dump truck had crashed into it.

Part 10

A time of trial had arrived for Mina Mathers the Black Cat Witch.

“…I’m so hungry.”

Yes, this was no time to be celebrating the newfound freedom of a physical body after being released from the bonds of a processing device. She honestly thought her current version was less energy efficient. Academy City’s #1 had gone off somewhere while her vision blurred. Mina honestly wished she could have gotten more out of him.

“Sigh…”

The big city had seemed like it never slept, but there were actually few stores that stayed open late into the night. The cat ears and tail sticking out from her mourning clothes had wilted and she had been drawn to a brightly-lit convenience store, just like bugs gathering around a light. The miniskirt Santas and snowmen had gone home, so a lonely atmosphere surrounded the store.


Merry
Christmas!
24時

But she did not enter the store and instead let her back slide down the glass window until she was sitting on the ground. Yes, it was the fluorescent lights themselves and not the shelves of food that had stimulated her hunger. She pulled out an extension cord used to power the electric sign placed out on the sidewalk and she stuck the plug into her mouth, but it did not work very well. All she got was a weird flavor.

Once her eyes started spinning behind her veil, the black cat witch realized something was wrong.

(This is only 100 volts and 15 amps… Does it need to be an industrial-level power source? Or would a train's high-voltage line work? No, I feel like I'm looking at this all wrong. Oh, right. Biological bodies use fat and carbohydrates as a power source, don't they?)

That could easily lead to something like the people from countries that insisted that french fries were vegetables, but that may have been unavoidable when the historical Mina her body was based on was from the country where people thought fish and chips "taste like mum's cooking".

The mourning clothes and cat ears lady did not hesitate to circle behind the store.

The metal box was firmly locked, but a legendary magician could not be stopped by something like that.

"Hee hee hee. I have the artistic talent that constructed the foundation of the many Tattvas and magic circles used during the Golden cabal's prime. Do you really think there is anything I cannot do? I can pry this open with nothing more than a palette knife and two wires I find on the ground."

She was feeling a little loopy after experiencing hunger for the first

time, so please go easy on her.

After forcing open the metal box that's lid popped upwards like a treasure chest, she found something truly unexpected within: nothing at all.

The box should have been full of expired bentos, drinks, and more, but there was nothing there. She only saw the smooth and cold bottom.

"K-…"

It was the shock more than the actual hunger that broke her.

"Kyuuuu~ ~ ~"

Feeling faint, Mina Mathers (the homeless unemployed widow) went fully limp, pressed her stomach against the opened box, and partially laid her upper body inside the box, but then the convenience store's metal back door opened.

It was possible the metal box had the same sensors as an automatic door and could detect anyone around it.

A middle-aged man stuck his head out and spoke to her.

"Goods are only just getting back into circulation after the heat wave, so we aren't so overrun with food that we have to throw any of it out."

After being afflicted with intense hunger (or maybe not all that much hunger, but Mina did not know how to handle it the first time she experienced it), Mina Mathers was unable to move a step and decided to squat down in the metal box as if she had decided that would be her home now. The middle-aged convenience store

manager must have had some interesting thoughts when he saw that, but he invited her into the store's office.

"Well, they do say being beautiful opens doors. Ehehn."

"?"

The man could only tilt his head when the black cat witch proudly puffed out her chest for no apparent reason.

"I'll of course need you to keep this a secret from central, but these things happen from time to time."

The manager must have found some spare time and taken a break because he walked across the office while avoiding the snowman costume someone had left on the floor after stripping it off. Based on the star-shaped magnets on the whiteboard, they were doing good business taking cake orders. He grabbed a bento from a rough pile of them on a corner of the table.

The black cat witch's cat ears pricked up.

"Mh!? So you do have unsold bentos! If you have extras, then I will ecologically recycle them for you. Woof woof!!"

"It takes an odd person to start woofing while dressed like that. And these aren't expired. They're damaged."

"?"

"There's nothing wrong with the food itself, but the corners were crushed in transit and we can't put them out for sale. The contents are just fine, but everyone would avoid them. The inspector from central told us to keep them back here since it would give the place a bad image."

"I see…The news said the circulation of goods had recovered, but I

guess things aren't that simple behind the scenes."

"They'll eventually go bad since no one can eat them, so we'll just end up stuffing them in that box. But I just can't bring myself to treat them like garbage until the date on the sticker has passed."

"I see, I see. That is wonderful for you. By the way, my stomach is begging for a Christmas roast beef salad, assorted fried party foods, bite-size French bread, a 500mL bottle of nonalcoholic champagne, and a strawberry shortcake. Drool drool."

"You weren't listening to a word I said, were you? Well, I guess this is better than sending them to the box."

"Oh? You don't collect these Christmas festival stickers that will earn you a whole turkey on Christmas Eve?"

"Collecting those from products we throw out would count as embezzlement. I probably wouldn't get in trouble for something so minor, but still."

It was hard to tell if Mina Mathers was listening when she was bent over and intently focused on the bento spinning around in the microwave. The cat tail was standing straight up from the butt stuck out toward the manager.

He did not seem to care that the lovely mourning clothes woman tore open the bento's packaging and crudely scarfed down a late (and Christmas-themed) dinner, but that may have been because he was from this country that serves alcohol and large meals even at wakes and funerals.

"So this is the flavor and fullness of a properly cooked meal. It really is something you can only understand after trying it for yourself."

The middle-aged manager smiled bitterly.

“You sure can eat.”

“I must thank you for inviting me in.”

Mina seemed to be having trouble cutting the piece of shortcake using the provided plastic fork. She pressed the side of the fork against the top of the cake a few times before giving up and grabbing it with her hand. She supported the sides of the spongey cake with her fingers like it was a tart and she brought it right to her mouth. The fact that it looked elegant was a testament to Mina Mathers’s appearance.

The manager responded to the black cat witch while watching her eat.

“Yes, why did I do that? I guess I’m just used to these ‘ridiculous requests’ that you won’t find in the manual.”

“?”

“It was the same when this one teacher asked me to watch the children who stopped by afterschool and look out for any signs of abuse on their teeth or clothing. Maybe I figured he must have a good reason to ask such a big favor.”

“There was no real reason for me. I only came here because I was hungry.”

“Ha ha. And that sounds like something that teacher would say.”

Mina Mathers tilted her head at the manager’s words.

But the middle-aged man had more to say.

“That teacher’s hope was to distance his students from even the slightest danger, but that was a means to an end and not a goal itself. …There was nothing in him himself. No, he may have never

been interested in a fulfilling life for himself. Are you familiar with the story of The Happy Prince? You know, the one where a prince statue decorated with jewels asks a swallow to carry the jewels that make up his body to the poor people."

"I am familiar with most fairy tales and literature. My administrator was the kind of person who would focus on the hidden and magical meanings in the Alice stories."

"He was someone right out of that story. He was sensitive to other people's dangers, but he had no interest in himself. He didn't save them because he had any real reason to; he couldn't abandon them because he had no real reason to. And I wasn't able to stop him from wearing himself away."

"…"

"He was an incredible person, but if I could redo my life, I don't know if I would have supported that lifestyle of his like I did. And that may be why I keep making the kinds of decisions he would have."

Mina Mathers placed that final bite of shortcake in her mouth.

The mourning clothes and cat ears woman slowly chewed and swallowed before opening her mouth.

"Kihara Kagun…"

"…"

"Kihara Kagun was a dangerous irregularity that greatly strayed from our plan, but that was why I monitored him as a top-priority threat. First the battle against Kihara Byouri in Baggage City and then the largescale raid to rescue the civilians in this nation's capital of Tokyo. It would be easy to sum up his end in a single

word, but I am not crass enough to do so. Instead, I will leave you with this: You said there was nothing in Kihara Kagun, but how was that greatest and worst of Kiharas able to keep the fire of revenge blazing so brightly for so long? That would be a testament to how happy his life had been. Even if that had already been taken from him, its value cannot be denied. Not by anyone."

"Wait a minute. Did I ever mention his name? Who are you?"

"Thank you for the meal."

As the manager watched on in surprise, Mina licked whipped cream from her fingers and slowly stood up from the office sofa.

And she answered him.

"Mina Mathers, or the black cat witch. But now I am no different from the children of this city: someone in search of a goal."

Part 11

It happened in an instant.

The electrical system must have been knocked out because the botanical garden's Christmas lights all went dark.

Next, the reinforced glass dome above Hamazura's head was unable to bear the impact and utterly shattered. Clear shards poured down like rain. It might as well have been a solid suspended ceiling.

While surrounded by the warning color of yellow, Hamazura pushed Takitsubo out of the way, grabbed Lilith, and got down on

all fours to protect both of them.

“Shut your eyes!!”

If Hamazura had not been fully covered by the Processor Suit’s special material, he would have been shredded. And the attacker would have known that. At the very least, they had made this attack knowing the baby was inside.

“Hamazura…”

“I’m really going to show that bastard hell now…”

Fighting would be easy, but then what would happen to Lilith as she groaned in pain? What should he do here? What should he protect, what should he let escape, what should he fight against, and what would he gain from that? The dumb delinquent worked his head as hard as he could.

Takitsubo was not known to the enemy, so would the standard plan be to allow her to escape with Lilith while Hamazura fought the attacker head-on to buy them time?

But then he would be stuck here.

As he had explained already, this was not over once they got Lilith to the hospital. The wanted criminal and the #1 would target Lilith while she was being examined and treated. In that case, he could not place Takitsubo on the game board. He had to instead send her back to the apartment to contact Mugino and Kinuhata. Then those three members of old Item could ignore Anti-Skill while staking out the hospital and intercepting either attacker when they showed up.

(Which means…)

An unpleasant *chill* ran down his spine.

Hamazura gave Aneri an instruction while still holding Lilith's abnormally warm body.

"Aneri, *begin recording*."

He had to make a few more preparations. He needed the botanical garden's search terminal, the silk cloth used to protect some plants from the cold, and a bicycle with gyros on its wheels…

"Hamazura, what are you doing?"

"The worst thing right now is letting them find you here. I'll meet the attacker out front. You leave through the back and contact Mugino and Kinuhata. That plan doesn't change no matter what happens in the meantime. Secretly protecting that hospital takes top priority."

"Hamazura."

"I'm counting on you. So go!"

Urged on by another rumble and tremor, Hamazura and Takitsubo set off running in different directions. He had a lot to do. This would be like threading a needle, but that was their only hope right now. Once he had hurried through the various tasks, the gaps of his armor were dyed red. He gathered his resolve and turned around while still holding a mass wrapped in a blanket.

There he saw a dangerous form wearing an identical Processor Suit.

The light coloring A. O. Francisca's silhouette changed from yellow to red.

With a sticky sound, something like clear jellyfish tentacles wrapped around his upper arms and thighs. The large weapon blossomed out from the human silhouette. Since their basic equipment was identical, it was the optional additions that

distinguished them. That organism weapon gave A. O. Francisca an advantage and the life Hamazura held gave him a disadvantage.

But Hamazura did not hesitate to speak.

“I’m at the end of my patience, you son of a bitch.”

Their clash began with an explosive roar.

“Aneri, follow the plan. Call up the recorded movement pattern! Protecting Lilith takes top priority!!”

Countless markers covered the floor.

A. O. Francisca could fire multiple jellyfish spears at once without having to approach, but Hamazura could not just swing around the blanketed mass he held. As if pantomiming a bag in midair, he kept the baby in the center at all times while he moved his own body around her. That allowed him to interfere with her as little as possible while still moving vigorously.

It may have been something like an irregular form of breakdancing or capoeira.

As if swimming through a sea of endless possibilities, Hamazura stepped on one colorful marker after another to pull off the complex movements and charge in toward the Processor Suit man from the right.

He had stored up all of his circular motion up to that point and released it all as a final roundhouse kick.

He might as well have been swinging around a ball-and-chain as the maximum scale impact assaulted A. O. Francisca’s temple.

He heard the sound of thick fibers tensing. In a move that seemed to ignore his own will, the wanted criminal had raised both arms to

protect his head. Even after guarding, his torso bent back, but it did not seem to do any real damage.

Hamazura had expected this much from an identical suit.

But A. O. Francisca still had the organism weapon.

Next, Hamazura tried to throw a chop toward the navel which was relatively hard to move out of the way due to one's center of gravity, but the wanted criminal, who could not move much while bent back so far, swung his right hand. The jellyfish manipulators on his upper arms and thighs immediately began to crawl.

They stabbed out from multiple angles simultaneously.

As warnings danced in his vision, Hamazura tried to slam on the brakes and switch from attack to evasion, but then an accident occurred.

He could dodge this on his own, but then he would violently shake the being in his arm. That could easily be fatal to a baby.

"…No, Aneri!!"

Hamazura Shiage may have chosen the right answer from a long term view. By leaving Takitsubo free, she could escape outside, get Mugino and Kinuhata's help, and keep Lilith safe once she arrived at the hospital. That may have been a beautiful answer with no loose ends.

But what about in the short term?

If he made a mistake in this very moment, he would be unable to take Lilith to the hospital in the first place.

There was no answer within the movable range defined by the Lilith-protection regulations.

Aneri could not calculate out a recommended route and the markers vanished from the floor like a receding wave.

Just then, a transparent spear pierced the center of what he held in his arm. The sound seemed almost too quiet.

Time seemed to have stopped.

Then even more jellyfish tentacles attacked. A few targeted Hamazura and a few targeted the already-pierced mass to be absolutely certain. He could not avoid the merciless assault and the blanket was torn to shreds and flew through the air.

A. O. Francisca must have felt victorious because his colored accents brazenly reduced from red to yellow.

But.

Who was it that time had stopped for? Hamazura or A. O. Francisca?

The dumb delinquent spoke a moment later.

“That’s what I thought.”

The shredded blanket was no more than a blanket.

It had only been made to look like more after being stuffed with the same sort of silk cloth used to create the crib. There was a reason this had fooled the wanted criminal’s cameras and sensors. Just before the battle, Hamazura had held Lilith and had Aneri’s sensors accurately record the movements of her limbs, the rising and falling of her lungs as she breathed, and even the beating of her heart. Afterwards, he had only needed to hold the decoy blanket while the Processor Suit’s motors and electric potential elastic tape reproduced the same vibrations. That had made it look like Lilith was there.

But if she was not here, where was she?

The real Lilith was not in Hamazura's hands or Takitsubo's hands.

Because…

Part 12

The Christmas songs were much quieter now but the lights were brighter than ever alongside an Academy City road late at night. A single bicycle was rolling along there.

There was no one sitting in the seat. That was to be expected since it was a ground delivery drone with gyros on its wheels and a large motor to power it. Unlike the aerial drones shaped like crane flies, it could carry a heavy load, there was no risk of dropping the package en route, and it was less affected by the weather and wind, so delivery services using them were popular and gaining much more of the market share. The services had begun to avoid the criticism that online stores were putting too much pressure on the delivery companies, but when this service expanded to include online auctions and any small packages, the bike courier and pizza delivery services started to tremble with fear.

And the botanical garden had terminals for looking up the names of flowers. That meant it had computers hooked up to the internet.

A "delivery" weighing less than 5kg was being carried in the cargo box protected by multiple springs and a scale-like device.

That delivery's name was Lilith.

The designated destination was that District 7 hospital which would

be accepting emergency patients and had a pediatric department.

Part 13

Finally.

It had finally happened.

He was still surrounded by red warning lights, but Hamazura Shiage felt like he had actually left the rails of pre-established harmony.

(Did you not expect that one?)

Both he and his opponent wore identical Processor Suits made of the same special material. He could not settle this with a head-on clash and the enemy had an organism weapon as an add-on. Even if he had Aneri's support, he would be gradually worn down over a lengthy battle.

So what was it he needed to avoid that result?

Needless to say, it was to betray the enemy Processor Suit's expectations.

(There's a taste of reality for you. It's time the world betrayed you and you fell down to the very bottom, you goddamn genius!!)

"Aneri!! Cancel the Lilith-protection regulations used for the bluff! Switch to full-power combat mode!!!!!!"

Just by taking a large step forward, Hamazura built up power for an attack. He transferred strength from his legs to his hips, back, shoulder, and finally fist. Just like the force propagating from a

drawn bowstring, the electric potential elastic tape and motors converted their movement force into an attack force.

This was the situation.

The world had been shaken.

In this instant alone, the pre-established harmony did not apply even when faced with a suit that looked like a mirror image of his own. He would not let this develop into a situation where they both used their full strength as they moved around in something like a dance.

Welcome to the uncertain world that divides victory from defeat and life from death.

Hamazura Shiage saw this as his greatest chance, but A. O. Francisca defended himself by crossing the many jellyfish tentacles in front of his body. It was like shutting a giant steel gate.

Hamazura ignored that and broke through it.

The spears in the way tried to block his fist, but it made no difference. Just as the tip of his fist touched the surface of the outermost one, the powerful impact pierced straight through. He broke through all of the spears like someone punching through a stack of tiles for a show and the impact finally reached the center of the wanted criminal's chest behind them all. The lights in the gaps of A. O. Francisca's armor finally rose from yellow to red, but it was too late.

Academy City's #1 had speculated that this special material had been developed for a shield bash attack that made use of the Windowless Building's Calculate Fortress which artificially reproduced a portion of Accelerator's vector control power.

If that was true, then in this moment Hamazura Shiage's fist contained something that rivaled the power of the #1.

Lilith.

Takitsubo Rikou.

To protect the people he cared for, he was prepared to knock down everything in his path with this demonic blow. With the ultimate artificial equipment, a strategy seemingly born from the shallow thinking of a monkey, and a program that gave concrete reality to his vague ideas, he had finally managed to grasp something outside of the pre-established harmony. To make use of this opportunity, he focused all his strength on attacking with this steel fist.

He may have reached the level of piercing the thick bedrock of an underground nuclear shelter.

Even the explosive sound vanished.

The scenery seemed to bend and explode around that central point.

An invisible shockwave burst not from A. O. Francisca's chest but from his back on the other side. The botanical garden trees and sprinklers behind him were knocked over and even the steel beams of the shattered glass dome were blown away.

He heard a sizzling sound like water being sprinkled on a red hot metal plate.

Hamazura had forcibly controlled so much momentum that his entire Processor Suit glowed red like a steel beam fresh off the blast furnace conveyer belt.

From there, everything actually slowed down.

The wanted criminal's body wobbled. He must not have been able to support his own weight even with mechanical assistance because he collapsed forward. The red light decorating the Processor Suit blinked like a fluorescent light on the verge of dying. But he managed to draw out his last ounce of pride and landed on all fours to at least avoid having his face hit the floor.

He looked like a criminal waiting to be beheaded.

Hamazura obeyed Aneri's instructions.

He stepped on the glowing marker and raised his right leg up higher than his face. He held that position for a moment and then swung his heel down with savage speed to strike the back of A. O. Francisca's head.

He would break the wanted criminal's pride.

The floor material broke and the visor gave the ground a kiss. This time, all the accent lights vanished.

But it was not over there.

With his foot still on the wanted criminal's head, Hamazura checked his surroundings. He had sensed this presence without needing a warning from Aneri. Was it that organism weapon? But it did not come from just one direction. This felt more like he was entirely surrounded.

No, it did not just feel like it.

His Processor Suit was still red. It had not returned to yellow or blue?

And with Hamazura's foot still on his head, A. O. Francisca's weakly extended right hand snapped its fingers.

It was a great flood.

Extraordinary walls pushed in from all directions.

Each individual mass was precisely 32kg. They had no set shape or color and they had scanned their environment to take on the form that would most efficiently lure in the greatest number of preys in this metropolis of a civilized country.

The Mimetic Predators numbered in the hundreds, thousands…no, tens of thousands as they surrounded and narrowed in on him.

They only walked at first, but then one began running and it all snowballed out of control from there.

Each one looked like a different sort of girl standing less than 130cm tall: a twintail girl in a dress, a short-haired girl in overalls, a dumpling-hair girl in a China dress, a leotard girl with a cloth headband around her forehead, a literature girl with glasses, a sports girl wearing a swimsuit, etc. But with this many of them, they did not even need to attack. Just by pressing in on him, they could crush him with enough force to bend and break even a large dam’s water-release port.

And Hamazura did not hesitate.

He even had time to wag his index finger at them.

“You really don’t learn, do you? I said I like short girls with big tits!!”

They were all no more than weapons shaped like little girls. When the first twintail girl rushed at him, he swung his fist down to knock her straight down. Then he kicked a braided glasses girl so hard she flew like an artillery shell. Their great numbers were not just a threat for Hamazura. If he could not have them pushing in at him as

a group, he just had to make sure they never got close. He used the enemy organism weapons as projectiles to knock them over from a distance and took out large chunks of that little girl army.

The main problem was the damage they did to his armor every time he touched them, but…

“Aneri! Can you assist me even if I’m wielding a weapon!?”

Aneri must have taken that as a challenge because a window opened and rapidly scrolled through a list of supported weapons, but it was far too fast for him to keep up. Aneri was probably doing that on purpose.

But once he pulled a thick metal pipe off of the sprinklers, the fight was his. He grabbed the long weapon near the center and swung it around to send out a flurry of blows with either end. It was a disposable weapon, so he did not care how much it was damaged. One Mimetic Predator must have realized the girl form had no effect because transparent jellyfish tentacles rapidly scattered from its arms and head while a great maw opened along its torso’s central line like an iron maiden. Hamazura knocked that down, slammed it into the center of the group like a shell, and kept the army from pushing in on him.

But there was a problem.

These were cytoplasmic weapons. That meant they could learn. Once he had cut through a decent number of them, the girls withdrew their tentacles and giant maws and kept their distance like a receding wave.

But they were not running away.

Hamazura recalled what this place was. The reinforced glass that protected the many plants from the winter cold had been

shattered, but the steel beams of the soccer ball framework were still overhead. The hundreds or thousands of girl-shaped organism weapons clung to those and quickly ruled the sky above.

He thought back.

What had happened when that glass rain had poured down on him?

He had been so busy protecting Lilith and Takitsubo that he had been unable to dodge it himself.

If 130cm and 32kg “artillery shells” were thrown down at him with that same density, there would be nothing he could do. And unlike when they were pressing in from a two-dimensional surface, he could not knock them over like dominoes when they used themselves like shells from up there.

If even one of them pinned him down, it was all over.

More and more would cling to him and keep him from moving until he was buried under a pile of human shapes. Simply touching those organism weapons had torn away at his suit’s special material like they were a tunnel boring machine, so the Processor Suit would eventually be destroyed and the damage would reach his body.

“Damn you…!!”

They were shaped like little girls, but they were something else entirely.

Perhaps so they could cling to and bite at him, the organism weapons dropped head-first as they jumped down toward him. There was no escape from that overwhelming density that might as well have been a suspended ceiling. Tension ran through his entire body and countless warnings flew through his vision.

But that was when it happened.

An even more frightening attack dropped from the heavens.

A straight line of white light landed in the center of the botanical garden and the thousands of organism weapons were blown in every direction.

It was someone with white hair that fully reflected the moonlight.

It was someone with sinister eyes more beautiful than the finest rubies which were said to be pigeon blood red.

And most importantly, it was the true #1 who easily held the title of Academy City's strongest.

"…!!!???"

Just one step.

Merely placing his feet on the ground had caused this shockwave. He broke through the hopeless and murderous suspended ceiling, sent the thousands of organism weapons flying in every direction, and left Hamazura Shiage with no choice but to work hard not to be blown away with them.

"So have you finally caught up with what's going on here? I feel like a few pieces are still missing, but you're on the right track. The train has been placed on the rails, so just follow that and it'll all come together."

He sounded casual.

Hamazura was not even sure the #1 was talking to him.

And something was wrong with Aneri who had been assisting Hamazura throughout. The colorful markers displayed all across the

floor now vanished like a receding wave. His options were sealed off. The program was telling him he could not win and that challenging this boy to a fight would be a mistake in and of itself. The conditions were different from when they had first clashed. The program had probably gathered more information for its learning routines and *corrected the previous mistake*.

He truly was frightening.

He really was the #1. He was a solid wall that killed all possibility just by standing there. He was a “crawling unfortunate accident” and you could only give up if you were caught by it. For anyone who knew even a bit about the terrors in this city’s night, Accelerator was like an anthropomorphized form of those crimes and atrocities.

“Why…?”

“?”

That meant this incident was serious enough to require a legend like that to make an appearance.

And yet Hamazura did not even know the origin of the Processor Suit he was trusting with his life.

“Why is someone like you pursuing Lilith? I don’t know what kind of secret or talent she’s hiding, but you’re already Academy City’s strongest! You’re the #1 *and there’s nothing higher than that*!”

He could have understood if it was the #2 or #3.

It would have made a lot more sense if a Level 0 was behind it.

They would have a reason to aim higher. Or they would eliminate others for fear of being dragged further down.

But Accelerator did not need to do either. He already has his throne as the #1 and there was no way anyone could drag him down from there for any reason.

However, that was when something unexpected happened.

The #1's appearance also easily destroyed the pre-established harmony that Hamazura Shiage and Aneri had built up.

And he did it with his words.

"Did you really think that Lilith baby was at the center of all this?"

It broke.

It shattered.

All his assumptions were turned on their head and he was dumped back to square one. And he did not have time for his thoughts to blank even for a moment when faced with such a dangerous enemy.

How had Accelerator read the timing through the visor?

He disappeared just as Hamazura blinked.

Accelerator had already moved right up to him. That monster had such a presence that it seemed creepy to hear him speak human language.

"If you're that confused, then get lost."

He seemed to only lightly touch Hamazura's solar plexus.

But then a great roar burst out and Hamazura's vision fell into darkness.

The warning lights in the Processor Suit's gaps went dark and his mind followed…but only after a few seconds had passed.

Why had his vision vanished first?

Because of the critical damage done to the Processor Suit supported by Aneri.

Between the Lines 2

There was no oxygen or gravity.

The Windowless Building had been thrown out into true outer space and the angel and demon's fierce attacks continued inside.

"Aneri seems to be doing her job quite well. But I do not like the idea of replacing her with Mina Mathers. I just can't see her growing so close to Hamazura Shiage. This has nothing to do with the good or evil and legitimacy or illegitimacy of either one. Aneri is the copy and Mina is the original. It is only polite to treat them as separate."

"…"

Coronzon, the great demon represented by the number 333, was a being of evil dispersion.

Her avatar Lola Stuart's long, long blonde hair floated in the weightlessness and the immense magic power contained within was released. Immediately, several explosions occurred around the woman's body. Yes, that was the greatest symbol of dispersion. And that supplied a new force for the screws, bolts, and glass shards floating around after being freed from the bonds of gravity.

She used the weightless space to create a storm of bullets with fearsome destructive power that flew horizontally toward her enemy.

The explosions occurred in more than one place.

This was the three-body problem. Several vectors fused together and intertwined as the storm of sharp shards flew, creating a single dangerous existence. It became a great maw lined with fangs.

“You cannot tell me you haven’t seen it, barf bag. If your specs were that low, no one would have put so much effort into defeating you.”

“Come to think of it, why did you send Mina Mathers to the surface?”

“I suppose a waste receptacle *would* look for a reason there. Even after everything, you can’t do any better than that?”

Meanwhile, Aiwass, the Holy Guardian Angel bearing the number 93, remained composed.

A demon’s role was to whisper sweet words. So anyone who tried to follow it by eye would not have been able to see even one grain of the sandstorm. When their naïve hopes, convenience predictions, and other self-made toxins eroded their mind, they would fail to dodge a perfectly avoidable attack and be defeated. If you read too deeply into it and tried to see through multiple hidden layers, you would only make a fool of yourself. Demons could not produce anything themselves, so that was how they achieved victory.

“Hey, toilet brush. Surely A. O. Francisca isn’t your only pawn.”

“…”

“Silence is an answer in and of itself. Well, Mina might become a trump card against you. Of course, this is her life we’re talking about. I won’t force her to do anything.”

“I have a simple question, Aiwass.”

“Ask away.”

As the explosions raged across the weightless space as a fierce attack, Aiwass made no attempt to even touch them. Just by gently flapping the wings on his back, the immense horizontal rainstorm was shaken, diverted, and launched upwards. However, it was not air that had done that.

That glowing figure had driven back a demon with just the power enveloping his body.

He would not allow any contaminant to approach him.

“Do you really think you can bring all of this to a clean end? Everything in the world trends toward dispersion. It is so much easier to throw everything out of order than to bring it all into order.”

“Dispersion? If you’re serious about that, then I am truly shocked by your narrow view of the world. Ever since the Big Bang, the world has had the boring tendency to trend toward convergence and stability. From the macro galaxies to the micro particles, everything is a series of similar spins. There are millions of species on that blue planet, but there is very little variety beyond the standard male/female divide. And snow crystals never leave the realm of 120 degrees. The world will bring itself into order with no assistance needed, just like a bathtub after pulling the plug. Rebellious elements like Aleister that struggle against it all and climb the waterfall are actually quite rare. *Not even a hero can do that.* And that is why they are so worth observing.”

The storm of the end raged between them.

A normal person's body would have been blown away by a single shard grazing them and any surviving silhouettes would have been turned into Coronzon's avatar anyway. But they still had enough focus leftover to calmly chat.

"That isn't a good enough reason," said Coronzon.

"So what?"

He immediately replied.

And that symbol of good and radiance, who, much like bleach, was dangerously bright and cleansing, continued with a sneer.

"I am a Holy Guardian Angel that throws in a crystal of knowledge to watch the ripples spread and bring revolution to the world. Do I look like I would have any love for that worthless ocean you call logic and efficiency?"

Chapter 3: That Person Cannot Forget the Kindness of Man – Gift_of_the_Hope.

Part 1

Emergency System Scan…98, 99, 100%.

Complete.

Error Report: Failed to recover data in damaged regions. (E#0153cd09)

Unresponsive clusters have been deemed physically damaged and have thus been frozen. Bypass routes for those clusters can be set and the registry can be rewritten to temporarily reroute the basic system files. Even with an optimistic estimate, performance is predicted to drop by at least 43%. The lower limit is unknown. And since the entire system is unstable, the number of background tasks will need to be reduced to limit the load and prevent a forced shutdown.

Safe mode construction complete.

Prioritizing response to the current situation and rebooting with unrecommended settings.

Part 2

"…Ah!?"

Hamazura Shiage awoke in the shredded late-night botanical garden.

How long had he been unconscious?

When he shook his head and tried to place a hand on his helmet, he finally realized something was wrong.

It was heavy.

He could feel the sensation of the grinding gears, like he was trying to move a powered-down robot arm by pushing and pulling on it. The lines of light running along the back of his hand and elsewhere were only flashing with an unreliable blue light.

"Aneri, what's going on!? Dammit, I can't figure this out if you don't tell me!"

There was no response.

The icons that had always appeared in the corner of his vision were absent. He did at least have his normal vision, but he could see something like gray static run through it at times.

…Something may have broken.

Once he reached that obvious possibility, raw fear crawled along his spine. This was not over yet. Takitsubo may have safely escaped the botanical garden and met up with Mugino and Kinuhata. But the #1 and Wanted Criminal A. O. Francisca, who may not have shown every card in his deck, were both still on the game board. There were no absolutes on this battlefield. He could not just hand over the baton and go home.

(That's right. What happened to him?)

He looked around the area, but the wanted criminal he had supposedly defeated was nowhere to be seen. No organism weapons were rushing toward him either.

On top of that, Accelerator had said something odd.

It may not have been Lilith alone at the center of this.

That concerned him, but not because he wanted to solve the riddle. If he did not know what they were after, it would be harder to predict their next move. He would lose his ability to judge where to raise the shield to safely contain the extraordinary destructive power of those monsters. At this point, hesitation would be deadly. If he paused for a moment and was suddenly stabbed in the side, there would be no recovering from it.

He had thought this incident would be over once he had protected Lilith to the end.

He had gotten Takitsubo, Mugino, and Kinuhata involved on that assumption.

…If that fell apart now, then he might have unwittingly dragged them into something truly dangerous.

If he was going to make up for that, what was his first step?

He had gotten on the wrong train at the station. He could not turn back time to return to the station. His mistake was set in stone, so he had to think about which station to get off at to best reach his original destination.

There was only one answer.

"…The hospital."

Whatever the case, the bicycle-based land delivery drone carrying

Lilith was on its way to that District 7 hospital and Takitsubo would have sent Mugino and Kinuhata to guard it. Whether Lilith was at the center of this or not, it would be best to gather everyone and come up with a plan together.

He could no longer tell what the #1 and the wanted criminal were fighting over.

Or how he had gotten dragged into this incident himself.

So once more, he would reveal the full picture of this incident.

And to do that, he had to reach that large “transfer station” where so many rail lines gathered.

“I just have to get to that hospital…”

Part 3

A cat-like “nyaohhhn” echoed through the night.

After finishing the battle and checking the surrounding environment, Accelerator looked up to see the black cat witch sitting on a branch of a roadside tree that was decorated with a string of LED lights and an outside speaker playing Christmas songs.

“…”

“I thought we had said goodbye already, but since we have found each other again, I can only assume we’re after the same thing. It would seem the person I am searching for will be found through that Processor Suit.”

With a line like that, you would never think she had walked behind a convenience store and stuck her head in a metal box not long before. Perhaps that was the same attitude as a cat that walked nobly along fences but captured mice and grasshoppers when out of sight.

But for Accelerator, this was a problem.

To be blunt, his conversation with Mina Mathers in the arcade had suggested she had no useful information. But if he treated her cruelly and upset her, she might follow him around and interfere with everything he tried to do. She was not a devastating opponent, but she would be a complete waste of time since she could predict and dodge all his attacks. That was not someone he wanted to deal with when his life was reliant on his choker's battery.

But you must not forget.

The word "cooperation" was not in the Academy City #1's vocabulary.

Speaking a few words was the most he would do.

"…Do whatever you want."

"Then I shall."

Showing no concern for her long skirt, Mina Mathers jumped down from the branch and landed next to the white monster.

"I have been thinking."

"About?"

"That Calculate Fortress defense was built to the same or greater standards as the Windowless Building, so which of Academy City's

functions was it meant to protect?”

“…”

“Only one thing comes to mind. I know it is an unexpected visual, but that would only make it safer. No one is stupid enough to label their important facilities as ‘important’ on a satellite map. A shape that gives no hint to its true function is a form of risk avoidance in and of itself.”

This was all old news for Accelerator.

Mina was confirming her speculation, but there was nothing new here for the #1.

So that monster asked just one thing.

“So what?”

“I have one thing I would like to confirm with you.” Mina stared at the white-haired and red-eyed monster from behind her veil. “Are you trying to retrieve it or destroy it?”

“…”

He clicked his tongue.

His answer here would determine Mina Mathers’s next action.

Accelerator could not afford to waste time with her, so he could not just ignore this.

“*I don’t give a shit who’s standing at the top. I just want to bring back what the people I know think of as normal days.*”

“Hee hee.”

Mina softly bumped into the monster who used a modern design cane.

The black cat witch smiled brightly behind her veil.

“You’ve gone soft, Accelerator.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve just changed my target to the toughest one of all.”

“As long as you understand that. Because the destruction of civilization is no more than an odd job that a swarm of mosquitos or flies could manage.”

“…Do you want me to reflect you, you damn woman?”

“Oh, excuse me.” Mina Mathers took a step away. “Now, let us share our information. Social media, security cameras, video sharing sites, and such are set up to automatically delete any secret information, but the drive recorders in cars are still poorly managed because it took so long to achieve a common standard. The Processor Suit is on the move. It is on its way to a District 7 hospital that is well-known in matters like these.”

“Were you hoping I would feel indebted to you?”

“Well, *that was not all I discovered*, but the other thing is related to the person I am searching for and has nothing to do with you. However, there is one pile of old paper that should be a troublesome irregularity even for you. Yes, this is an abnormality that has gathered far more than I have. So be careful.”

“…”

“Feel free to make a mess of things as you see fit. I will be achieving my goal in the meantime.”

Sure enough, Accelerator had not obtained any new information.

It was all things he had known for a quite a while.

“I don’t know who this moron is, but I’ll show him whose territory he’s set foot in.”

Part 4

To that being, the enhanced movements and program-controlled predictions supplied by the Processor Suit were not absolutely necessary.

To them, the Mimetic Predator organism weapons were no more than something that gave form to the inspiration they held in their hand.

Ghhh.

Mjhjhjhjh.

Bizarre “sounds” that did not seem like they could possibly come from a human mouth escaped from behind the visor. Their body’s axis was shifted and the heights of their shoulders did not match, but that being’s limbs could still move. The light from the gaps in their armor flashed and switched between red and yellow, but that was fine as long as it did not stop altogether. They could continue their mission like this.

But.

“?”

Al2O3. Guided by the red of a chemical formula, that being realized something and hid behind the pillar supporting a wind turbine.

This being had attacked and destroyed that Central Anti-Skill Station, but they held their breath and waited.

They waited for something to pass by without noticing them.

“Damn, were they over there!? I swear I caught a glimpse of them earlier!”

“Given the timing, you likely did. They are probably *noticing we have noticed them* about now. We should bring this to a direct confrontation soon.”

A silver-haired girl waved around a bundle of papers the size of yen notes. She used it like a compass, as if checking for something.

This being had expected to be discovered eventually.

But they had been delayed somewhat on the scene. They had apparently worked up some distrust by not making an appearance for a while. Returning like nothing had happened would be impossible now.

So they avoided regrouping with the others. They instead hid and waited for the others to pass by.

That being held their breath and maintained their silence.

…

…

…

Part 5

Hamazura too hid behind cover while dragging along his heavy body that's blue light flashed irregularly.

He had no idea how far the Processor Suit's functionality had dropped, so he wanted to avoid leaping from building to building. If the drop in specs was uniform, he could figure something out, but he was afraid of it being more of a wave with peaks and valleys. He could not entrust his life to it until he had that figured out.

But at the same time, the ground was not as dangerous as it had looked. After the attack on District 7's Central Anti-Skill Station, reinforcements had been called in from other districts, but with multiple chains of command and the general state of confusion, they seemed to be having difficulty working together. Thinking back, Hamazura realized no armed vehicles or helicopters rushed to the botanical garden.

Most likely, the city had yet to recover as well as it seemed.

Anti-Skill was busy regaining internal control so the entire organization did not fall apart, so they did not have time to pursue external threats like wanted criminals. Of course, that information would cause the public order to collapse, so they were doing their best to at least look like they were keeping an eye on everyone.

The Christmas songs on the streets had been quieted for the night and Hamazura watched inattentive red flashing lights drive from right to left before he stepped out from behind a vending machine. He was on his way to the hospital Lilith would have been carried to. On the way, he passed by a movie theater bearing a poster for a horror B-movie that would probably have Kinuhata drooling. The poster depicted a vampire older sister and zombie little sister

grappling. That late show was probably targeted at people who were sick of the Christmas mood instead of people looking for a date movie. Hamazura figured it was like getting sick of New Year's food over winter break and going out for gyoza or pasta instead.

On the way to his destination, he kept clenching and unclenching his fists and shifting between walking and running in an attempt to judge the state of the Processor Suit.

(What even is this Processor Suit in the first place?)

If Lilith was not the core of the issue, this was the only other possibility he could think of.

It enhanced his movements and it used partial vector control to absorb, disperse, and soften impacts. It also had Aneri inside it, but was that really enough to make such accurate movement predictions? …*But despite all that, it was not necessarily meant for combat.* What Hamazura was doing may have been like hitting someone with a fishing rod.

And there was one other important point.

(I was supposedly dumped out into the city as a decoy for A. O. Francisca, so would my Processor Suit even have its primary function installed?)

Normally, there would be no need to do that.

In fact, he had really only needed a helmet with the same design as the wanted criminal's.

It was strange for his to be high-spec enough to carry Aneri. That was too much for a mere decoy. Or had the "real one" been mass-produced, so discarding a few of them was no big deal?

(I just hope it doesn't turn out there's some game master out there

who's making 50 or 100 people in Processor Suits fight each other.)

While thinking about all this, he had arrived near the hospital which was decorated with some Christmas lights.

Carelessly entering the hospital grounds was dangerous since they had a hotline to Anti-Skill, so he searched for a location that gave him a view of the whole building.

But that was why he noticed something was out of the ordinary.

"…?"

It was not that the hospital had been destroyed in some kind attack or that lots of those organism weapons were clinging to the wall. His Processor Suit's lights remained blue.

Several ambulances were stopped with their flashing lights off near the emergency patient entrance. No, it was more than that. There were an awful lot of personal cars in the parking lot for so late at night. They should only have been accepting emergency patients at this hour, but people were pounding on the glass door to the normal entrance.

(Are they overrun with patients?)

What that meant slowly sank into Hamazura's mind.

Then what had happened to Lilith after she was delivered here? She had not been accompanied by a parent. She had not had anyone to speak for her, so in the worst case, couldn't she have been abandoned out in the cold!?

"Are you goddamn kidding me!?"

He ignored the overall situation and started running toward the emergency patient entrance, but a slender leg stuck out from a

shrubbery next to him.

The Processor Suit's gaps belatedly turned yellow, but it was too late.

His legs were perfectly swept out from beneath him and someone dragged his fallen body into the bushes.

An exasperated voice reached his ears.

"Super what are you doing, Hamazura?"

"The combat species!? It's that monster of a girl!"

"Hm? Did you just let slip something I super can't overlook, you bastard!?"

It really had just slipped out, so he could not help it.

This was former Item's smallest member: Kinuhata Saiai.

"Since you know it's me behind the mask, I assume Takitsubo explained everything."

"Yeah, but it was super hard deciphering what all her wordless gesturing meant."

"That's not her fault. Communicating with monsters can't be easy. I mean, a combat species that communicates with its fists can't comprehend anything too complicated."

"Now I know I didn't mishear that! It's time to super do it!!"

"Can we at least not do it behind a bush in the middle of the night!!!???"

Plus, this was no time to be fooling around with a short flat-chested

girl with no Christmas spirit. He had to confirm what was going on in the hospital and if Lilith was all right.

The girl put him in a headlock of wrath and rubbed her fist against his temple, so Hamazura digitally enjoyed her armpit as he asked a question.

“So what happened? This isn’t because of the heat wave, is it!?”

“Ugh, explaining would be a pain… It’ll be super faster if you go see for yourself.”

“See, you are a monster that rejects human civilization. …Wait, where are you taking me?”

She grabbed his arm with her small hand and pulled him over to the back staff entrance. Setting foot in the hospital was not the best idea given their hotline to Anti-Skill, but Combat Species Kinuhata Saiai did not seem to care since she figured they could punch their way out if they ran into any trouble.

She took him to the pediatric department. They passed right by the reception desk which had a mailbox for Christmas cards to Santa and she instead guided him to an examination room.

A small Christmas tree for hospitalized children was set up.

Next to that, a sexy beauty with long, wavy chestnut hair and a coat leaned against the wall with her arms crossed.

That was Academy City’s #4, Meltdowner.

Aneri seemed to be malfunctioning because the entire Processor Suit was dyed bright red.

“So now it’s the combat species’ biggest monster of all.”

“…This is a hospital, so it wouldn’t be a big deal if I tore off 5 or 10 of your limbs, would it?”

“Have you gone so insane you don’t know how many arms and legs people have!? Even your starting number was above the limit and nothing about that made sense! Not to mention that tearing off just one of them would be a big deal!!”

Takitsubo Rikou, the bare-midriff miniskirt Santa with kneesocks, was sitting on a bench. Hamazura was glad to have a girl who could hold a conversation and actually had some Christmas spirit.

She pointed toward the examination room door that had a round wreath hanging on it.

“Lilith is in there. She’s being taken care of, so don’t worry.”

“I see…”

At the very least, they had avoided the worst-case scenario where no one took her in and she was left out in the cold. But it was too soon to be optimistic. Hadn’t Lilith been suffering from an unexplained fever?

“But what was wrong with Lilith?”

“That’s the thing…”

Takitsubo trailed off there.

And the inconsiderate combat species butted into the conversation.

“The medical computers have super stopped working, so they say they can’t get any of that specialized information they rely on.”

“What does that mean? Did some kind of virus lock them up???”

“It’s a more fundamental issue.” Mugino sighed while still leaning against the wall. “While it looks like most of the city’s functions have recovered, it seems access to the Bank, Academy City’s general database, still isn’t back up. That of course keeps the pharmacists from doing anything, but it’s also stopped most of the scans needing to be run and the surgeries that were scheduled.”

“Fortunately, a lot of the people being taken to the hospital don’t really have anything wrong with them. After fighting over a single cup of water during the heat wave, a lot of people apparently started super overeating now that they suddenly find themselves back to their normal lives.”

…That would be why the emergency patient entrance had been so busy.

“But even if they don’t have all that convenient data, the doctors are licensed professionals, aren’t they?” asked Hamazura.

“100 years ago, professional doctors would do an appendectomy without gloves or even sterilizing their tools with boiling water, but do you really think anyone wants to do that nowadays? If they go ahead with a medical procedure without access to those convenient services, they’re placing all the responsibility on their own shoulders. There are surprisingly few professionals who are willing to work outside the manual in order to save people.”

“…”

Of course, not all the doctors were like that. There had to be some medical workers who were rushing to help patients even in these circumstances. But there were far too few of those, so the tasks just kept piling up. The benefits of their work could not reach everyone.

And Lilith was apparently one of those stuck in the queue.

No one had done anything wrong here. It was just that reality was cruel and gave no thought to human circumstances.

“Then we need to recover access to that Bank,” said Hamazura. “This isn’t just an issue for this hospital. We can’t bypass the problem when all 23 Districts are jammed up.”

“But super how do we do that?”

At times like this, it was important to have people who would harshly shove the hurdles in his face instead of soothing him with emotional platitudes. If they all held back, they would be unable to even directly face the problem.

“Anyone can easily use the Bank. Every school and hospital relies on it. …But only over the internet. No one knows where it’s physically located. In fact, no one knows what color, shape, or size it is.”

“…”

“And even if we tracked it down to some nuclear shelter or strategic satellite, there would still be the technical issue. This isn’t like gathering individually-sold parts and constructing a motorcycle. Messing with this and getting nowhere fast will only shorten that baby’s life.”

“……
……”

But Hamazura stopped listening partway through.

No, he started making connections in his mind.

The usual *chill* remained on his spine.

How had he immediately realized that silent and invisible surprise

attack at the phone booth was the #1's vector control?

Was peeking at the engineer's fingertips earlier in the day really enough to reproduce them at the supermarket ATM?

What had led him to immediately search out Lilith in the pitch-black Anti-Skill station?

How had he treated the injured Anti-Skill officer?

Why had he predicted that Lilith was at the center of it all?

There was plenty more than just that. Until now, he had thought he had made it this far with his own skill at using the Processor Suit and Aneri.

But what if that was not the case?

He had taken inspiration from the many options, chosen one of them, and taken action. But what if even that was no more than one of the Processor Suit's functions?

What was it Hamazura Shiage had needed to make it this far?

He doubted the answer was solid armor or high mobility. Once he had a goal in mind, it was a straight line from there. He made more and more connections that led him to a single answer.

Everyone had used it but no one had known what its physical form was.

In that case, there was nothing sillier than letting his preconceived notions hold him back.

He had to assume it was not necessarily some massive underground facility or a server station that filled an entire skyscraper.

(I don't know what the Processor Suit was developed for and it has enough spare data processing power to run Aneri at full specs.)

What if everything had been contained in the Processor Suit from the beginning?

What if the suit had not been performing data searches based on each new situation he found himself in?

The #1 had said Lilith was not the core of this incident.

Then what were they fighting over?

"Come to think of it, I never figured out what the original incident was about."

"Hamazura?"

"The attack on the general securities trading office! Why did A. O. Francisca attack that place wearing a helmet just like this one? That giant building's high-speed server used for stock trading or crude oil trading may have been the *previous generation*. That could have been its disguise!!"

Hamazura moved the Processor Suit's heavy right arm and touched the side of his head.

"Aneri…"

Mugino and Kinuhata were telling him Academy City's medical facilities were cut off from the Bank.

And he recalled the #1's words.

"So does this mean you're the parent?"

What had that really meant?

If he was right…

Could it be?

“Aneri, can this Processor Suit use the internet? Switch to online mode!!”

He heard a monotone beep.

And he saw some text displayed at the bottom of his vision like a movie’s subtitles:

Error Report: Online access unavailable due to an address conflict. (E#03431d0f)

Only offline mode actions are currently available.

Part 6

Accelerator was also beginning to figure out how it worked.

He was accustomed to his modern design cane, but it still shifted his body weight in a way that wore him out faster. He leaned against a convenient roadside tree as he thought.

(It makes sense. For maintenance and part replacement, they would want at least a full set of spare parts. So if you put them all together, you could make yourself a fully-functioning Processor Suit.)

He breathed out.

(The problem is how that second one is being used.)

That was when he noticed something.

Had she reacted to the outside world with such interest because she had all the answers she wanted or because she was stuck and wanted to head off in search of more information?

(That black cat woman named Mina disappeared at some point. Well, she just liked to mess with me and talk down to me. And I don't recall placing a bell around her neck.)

The Bank had no set form.

It had successfully constructed an indestructible defense by having its parts constantly rearranged like a puzzle, having no set size or shape, and repeatedly changing location. So as time had passed, it had taken on the form of different systems: an underground nuclear shelter, a skyscraper, a satellite, an electronic information control system, etc. …Yes, to the point that the people using it over the network could never even imagine what form the hardware took.

That might sound like going overboard, but the similar-yet-different Tree Diagram had vanished one day. So it may have made sense to prepare as much insurance as possible.

And this time, it had *just so happened to take a humanoid form*.

That was the truth of the Processor Suit. It was not an access terminal. It was the massive database itself.

The complete recovery of the Processor Suit…no, of the Bank would mean breathing life back into the cold surveillance system setup by the upper, upper, upper levels of the city.

(Well, this was right after that heat wave. It was probably the perfect timing for a format change.)

The heat wave caused by a member of the Kamisato Faction had actually been powerful microwaves sent down from space. Since it had destroyed all electronics in the city, that attack had caused trouble for Accelerator as well, but it was possible to defend against it as long as you made the proper preparations such as sheltering deep underground or within a ship's hull.

But very few coordinates would already have had that level of defenses.

If it was discovered the Bank was still functioning after that heat wave, people who disliked the presence of that general database would search through all of those possible locations. It had been time for a change. It had been the perfect timing to discard the old Bank and switch over to a new Bank out of the many candidate colors, shapes, and sizes.

…And since those conditions only applied to the "current generation", they would have wanted to go in the complete opposite direction for the "next generation", even if that meant choosing an extreme design that ignored all logic. *Yes, they would have most wanted something that did not look at all like a largescale server system.*

From there, it was easy to guess the rest.

Those who wanted to reboot the Bank vs. those who wanted to stop it. The participant who ruled over the master system vs. the participant who had to submit as the slave system. Organizations that wanted to profit vs. groups that feared harm. In the public and hidden sides of Academy City, many confrontations had developed over the whereabouts of the human-sized Processor Suit.

(It feels like one of them is the real one and the other was discarded as a diversion. But both of them have really been taking their time. And why are the two Processor Suits trying to destroy

each other? I get why the one used as a diversion would be pursuing the real one, but why is the opposite case happening? If I had to guess…)

Accelerator had an idea in mind.

He then glanced down at his mobile device.

…The previous generation Bank would have had a completely different form. It should have already been disposed of, so an error message would have popped up if the next generation could not take over. It was possible they would even revert to the old version for the time being. But there was no sign of that happening. That meant the next generation was still functioning, just not fully connected.

“Tch… But I thought they were both destroyed back at that botanical garden. Damn those zombie machines. Did they patch together the torn wires to get them back up and running?”

Part 7

Hamazura slapped his hands across his body.

Presumably because monsters like Mugino and Kinuhata were nearby, the Processor Suit’s gaps remained at their maximum alert of red. He could not find a port for a cable anywhere on the suit.

Aneri was no more than an engine.

Without the database to search, he could not make use of Aneri’s strong points. When Aneri had shown him how to do strange martial arts moves, found the secret map of the Anti-Skill station,

and (on a smaller scale) shown him how to comfort a baby or make a crib, he had assumed the information came from the internet, but Aneri had just said the suit could not be put online.

Then where had all that data been hidden?

The answer was simple: the Processor Suit itself was an enormous database. That was why Aneri had been functioning at full ability in offline mode.

“Damn. If I’m right, then this should be the Bank… So there has to be something, right!? I don’t need a wireless signal or a connection to the network. Isn’t there some way to get the data out with just a cable!?”

Lilith was still suffering and she was not being examined or treated because the hospital’s medical equipment had lost their connection to the Bank. If he could get all this data out of the Processor Suit, he might be able to save that baby. And he might be able to breathe life back into all the stalled hospitals and allow them to accept all those patients in need!!

They had all the puzzle pieces, but they would not fit together.

They could not receive the benefit of what they had.

It felt like having the key and the treasure chest, but finding someone had poured glue into the keyhole.

“Why can’t I use online mode, Aneri? Answer me!?”

As soon as he asked, Hamazura’s right hand moved on its own. He was not holding any kind of writing implement. Like a child scribbling on the road with a rock, the special material fingertip rapidly scraped out a series of words on the hospital wall with movements like a printer head.

It said the following:

Two identical models. The same SIM.

Generalization necessary. Identical model must be slaved.

…It was finally all fitting together.

Hamazura felt like he could finally see why he had been attacked.

It went back to what Accelerator had said.

The “parent” he mentioned had meant the “parent device”.

If the general securities trading office in the first attack had contained the previous generation database, then Wanted Criminal A. O. Francisca would have acquired a lot of data and secret keys for his Processor Suit. He had likely intended to take over as the new Bank.

Hamazura had been placed in his suit as a decoy to lose pursuers like Accelerator.

But by gathering the spare parts, the mere diversion had ended up with a truly identical model. So the base program and settings profile had been identical. The two Processor Suits with duplicate personal information and ID numbers were interfering with each other, preventing either one from getting proper network authentication.

That was why the wanted criminal had returned to Hamazura.

Despite being the one to set him up in the first place.

More accurately, A. O. Francisca would have been out of options if Anti-Skill removed Hamazura’s Processor Suit, left it under top level security, and preserved it as evidence. So he had needed to stop

Hamazura's suit from functioning even if it required a rather forceful method.

He had either needed to fully destroy the processor core or slave the device – that is, change the Processor Suit's internal settings so it offered up all privileges and could be remotely controlled at all times.

(How did Aneri get in this Processor Suit? It's offline and I don't see any kind of communication port… Did they get in through an exposed connection while A. O. Francisca was assembling the spare parts?)

But in that case…

Just then, a powerful tremor shook the entire hospital. It was like a repeat of the Central Anti-Skill Station and the botanical garden, so it had to be him. To Hamazura Shiage, it felt as familiar as having an old friend ring the doorbell for a visit.

"Hamazura…"

"No, this is fine." Hamazura cut off Takitsubo. "In fact, this is perfect. I was the disposable decoy and he was the main one. And since I haven't seen anyone else in a Processor Suit, this ends once I defeat him. As long as I can get this suit online, we can save Lilith… no, save everyone trying to rely on a hospital in this city. It's at least worth trying!!"

Part 8

In truth, Hamazura Shiage did not care all that much whether he won or lost. Whoever won, the Bank could be switched to online

mode, the hospitals could resume normal functions, and Lilith could be saved. If he was certain of the wanted criminal's cooperation, throwing the fight would not be a problem at all.

But the problem was whether he could trust A. O. Francisca whose face he had never seen. Until now, that masked man had tried to kill him without any warning at all and he had mercilessly used his jellyfish spears to pierce the blanket disguised as Lilith. If his plan was to increase the Bank's value by keeping it to himself and then selling it outside of Academy City, then it would all fall apart. It was possible the hospitals would not return to normal and Lilith would not be saved.

So Hamazura had to be certain.

He would defeat the wanted criminal and make his Processor Suit the one and only Bank.

If he was missing some working parts, he could tear them off of A. O. Francisca's suit.

"Mugino, Kinuhata. You two take care of Lilith. This guy uses a Processor Suit just like mine along with a bunch of organism weapons. Either one has to be defeated before it makes contact. The organism weapons are bad enough that they can tear into this special material at a touch. A flesh-and-blood human would be killed instantly, so don't let them anywhere near Takitsubo or Lilith. …And Mugino. Whenever you fire Meltdowner, make sure you aim out a window. Knowing you, you would start firing everywhere and vaporize other patients and doctors. Make sure no one else is in the way."

"What will you do, Hamazura?"

"I'm going to directly attack him."

With that said, Hamazura left the others and walked down the late night hospital's hall.

He knew this would not be that simple. Even at full strength, he had needed to catch A. O. Francisca off guard to break down the pre-existing harmony and not even the greatest attack he could muster had fully stopped him. And this time, Hamazura's Processor Suit had taken a lot of damage from Accelerator's attack, so he could no longer draw out the same specs as before.

It did not matter if it was a cheap trick. He had to come up with some kind of plan to win.

Instead of an operating room or nurse station, he made his way to a rehabilitation room that would be closed and deserted at this hour. The suit's weird malfunction had continued throughout, so its gaps only returned from red to yellow after he had moved away from Mugino and the others. He had chosen the rehabilitation room because it seemed like the dumbbells, barbells, and other training equipment would provide more accessible destructive power than fancy medical equipment.

But once he stepped inside, something caught his attention.

A fairly expensive racing cycle sat by the wall, perhaps as a part of the interior decoration.

"…I think I'll be borrowing that."

Even that dumb delinquent had enough skill to mess with a bicycle in a garage.

With the Processor Suit having issues, he could not remain entirely reliant on Aneri. It was time to support himself. He only had to think back to what he had done in his Skill Out days.

The enemy had already infiltrated the hospital.

He would not have a long time to set anything up.

He would be lucky if he had 10 minutes.

After grabbing the lightweight and high-quality bicycle made of aluminum, he disassembled the frame to acquire a few of the pipes. Those would form the main body. He pulled the rubber tube from a tire and used it as a bowstring. The chain, gears, and pedals were made into a crank. The seat was a shoulder support, the break lever was a trigger, and the handles were the fore grip and rear grip.

In no time, the silhouette had been transformed and he now had a giant crossbow about as long as he was tall.

(It's not really a good thing that these skills haven't gotten rusty.)

And since it was the strengthened rubber bowstring that stretched instead of the aluminum bow itself, it may have technically been a monstrous slingshot.

He would need to use the gears and chain to crank back the thick rubber bowstring, but that would increase the destructive power. This had enough power to easily fire a brick or a bowling ball, so simply using a sharp metal arrow would waste that advantage. And when his opponent had special armor that mechanically softened any blow, he would only get himself killed if he focused entirely on the surface damage.

"A flail…no, would it be a blackjack in this case?"

He fished through the trashcan in the corner and found a few 500mL bottles, probably for some kind of sports drink. By filling them with gravel, they would make a decent weapon. He cut open

a hanging sandbag to get the sand out and filled each one to a different heavy weight. He then packed them in a nylon knapsack and carried it over his shoulder.

That was known as a blackjack.

Originally made by stuffing a soft leather sack full of sand or small metal balls, a blackjack was a handmade weapon meant to efficiently supply a shock to the inside of the body. They did damage in a different way from a normal hammer or bat. He did not know how effective this would be against someone with electric potential elastic tape and motors, but if they worked well, they might be able to get the impact through the special material.

Even if a normal punch would be negated, he figured an oddly-shaped impact had a chance of causing an error.

If he was only after destructive power, he could have increased his options with Molotov cocktails or acid rounds, but this was a hospital. He did not want to rely on fire, gas, or any other firepower that he could not control.

(That just leaves aiming…)

Here, adding a primitive iron sight would take too much time. So he took a shortcut by swiping a penlight laser pointer from a nearby whiteboard and taping it on.

He had no time. With the completed weapon, Hamazura turned the crank on the seat and walked toward the rehabilitation room's exit. He wanted to test it first. He aimed the crossbow at a Christmas tree but then stopped. He changed his mind and aimed at the training machine next to it instead.

The training machine used pulleys and weights to build up one's pecs and he aimed the laser pointer's red dot right at the center.

“Sorry.”

With a loud noise, the “soft blunt weapon” created from a plastic bottle accurately struck the machine. He had no complaints about the accuracy or power. When it hit, the bottle burst and scattered sand everywhere, but the stainless steel frame of the training machine was transformed into a mangled mess. With his test firing complete, Hamazura finally set off toward his deadly battle.

And as he prepared the second shot, something became quite clear.

(No matter how hard I try, it takes 10 seconds to reload. Damn, I could’ve done so much better with the suit’s electric assistance.)

In such a short-term showdown, he did not have to worry about the rubber giving out. Before coming across the enemy, he cranked back the bowstring and aimed straight ahead while walking down the dark hallway. He had no idea what the other patients and doctors would do, so he had to make sure he did not accidentally fire on one of them if they walked around a corner.

(Where is he? Where’s he coming from? Using the elevator late at night would stand out too much. So will he use the emergency stairs?)

Ten minutes had passed since the initial clash and the wanted criminal would have been free to move around the entire time. There were no shouts or screams echoing through the hallway. Hamazura hoped that meant he was not indiscriminately killing people, but it also meant he had escaped from the public eye after making such a commotion and was walking around without anyone noticing.

(The ducts? The garbage chute? No, maybe he could use the elevator like that? If he climbed up the shaft without calling for the

elevator itself, the lights wouldn't activate.)

While considering all those possibilities, he made his way toward the emergency stairs.

But then the gaps in the Processor Suit's armor were dyed an eerie red.

However, this was not because Mugino or Kinuhata were near.

A creepy form was clinging to the outside of the window right next to him.

"…!!!???"

He swung the giant crossbow around at almost the exact same moment as the identical Processor Suit smashed the window with a helmet headbutt and jumped inside.

The enemy had apparently not had time to work alongside a Mimetic Predator this time.

It was A. O. Francisca. He too must have seen the other Processor Suit as his primary enemy because his suit's accent lights glowed a sinister red.

Hamazura yanked back on the trigger made from a brake lever, but A. O. Francisca grabbed the crossbow and pushed it straight up. The plastic bottle bullet was fired in the wrong direction and broke through a ceiling panel, allowing colorful cables to hang down.

But the fact remained that the wanted criminal's eyes had been drawn to the unexpected element of the crossbow. The combat patterns had to have shifted from the pre-established harmony that they could not settle things in an unarmed brawl.

Using a weapon was not the only way it could be useful.

Hamazura did not insist on holding onto his handmade crossbow and readily let it go. It was useless without a round loaded anyway, so it was not a problem if it was stolen. And by letting go just as his opponent tugged on it, he could knock the other suit off balance.

When A. O. Francisca staggered, Hamazura showed no mercy.

He removed the nylon knapsack he wore over his shoulder. It was filled with those plastic bottles, so it could be seen as a giant blackjack. By grabbing the shoulder strap and swinging it around, he swung the weight of all that sand toward the wanted criminal's helmet.

A. O. Francisca seemed to give up on dodging and focused on defense.

He used both arms to raise the crossbow so the knapsack hit it. This was not enough for a critical blow, but that was not a problem for Hamazura.

The plastic bottle bullets were filled with fine sand.

When the knapsack burst, that sand poured down on the wanted criminal's visor. No matter how many high-quality lenses and sensors he had, their sensitivity would drop if the surface was coated with something. There were gaps in the armor and joints, so it could even gunk things up inside. This could help widen the gap between the specs of the identical suits. Once those values were separated far enough, it was game over, so it was like a countdown to death.

And all of his actions acted as a hint.

(He immediately covered his face. That of course might be a *normal habit* like when someone playing with VR goggles waves their hands around, but if not, there might be something there. I don't

know if it's the sensors or the processor core, but there must be something in the Processor Suit he has to protect!!)

"Ohhhhh!!"

After *shifting his timing* with a shout, Hamazura once more raised his clenched fist and aimed for the top of A. O. Francisca's head.

Just then, his opponent reached out a hand. He pressed the little finger side of his fist against the center of Hamazura's chest like he was pressing down a stamp. It was not at all a powerful blow. It seemed more like pushing shut a door.

And yet Hamazura's body was knocked backwards.

"!?"

He tried and failed to hold his ground. Only then did he realize something had gone wrong with his footwork. While he was so focused on the wanted criminal's head, that opponent had lightly kicked Hamazura's ankle from an outside angle so his foot slipped.

Hamazura had been standing with his feet spread apart, but now his heels were pushed right together.

It did not matter who supplied the greater head-on blow. With his legs closed, even a small push on his body would knock him over.

Hamazura's entire body was covered by that special material, so a fall onto his back would not do much damage.

But A. O. Francisca held the bent and misshapen crossbow.

He swung it down like a pickaxe and the tip of the aluminum frame dropped toward the center of Hamazura's chest.

This full-strength attack used the great height difference between

them.

The impact was powerful enough for the crossbow to break into pieces. The floor Hamazura was lying on had several cracks run through it before it collapsed and they both fell to the next floor down.

“Gh…?”

He was supposedly protected by the Processor Suit, but Hamazura’s lungs cried out in protest and he had trouble breathing.

Countless warning windows appeared and his vision grew gray and staticky.

He had failed to get up off his back even after falling a floor and the wanted criminal was leaning down on him. The helmeted man held something in his hands. It was the bicycle handle used for the fore grip of the smashed crossbow.

Since it had broken, the edge of the metal pipe was quite sharp.

Still in the mounted position, he aimed for the visor of Hamazura’s defenseless face.

“Ogwah!?”

It was like driving in a metal stake.

The first blow did not pierce the helmet, but not even Aneri could fully negate the impact. Hamazura’s skull strained and filled with intense pain like someone had placed their palm over his face and pressed down with all their weight.

A. O. Francisca must have felt more confident because the gaps in his Processor Suit lowered from red to yellow.

And he did not just make the one attack.

If his opponent would not stop resisting, he would keep swinging down that sharp pipe until the boy stopped moving.

“Bghah!! Gh, ewhah!?”

Hamazura Shiage may have actually been *un*lucky that he was not killed instantly. The cartilage of his nose was transformed, the blood flowed back into his eyes, and he could not even wipe off his stinging eyelids with the helmet in the way. The red light covering his Processor Suit flickered on and off like a dying neon light. The way a rusty smell and flavor spread from his nose to his throat and then seemed to fill his entire body was like torture. It was more than just the pain. The face he was so familiar with was being *gradually destroyed*. It was like a demonic act that brought an overwhelming avalanche of disgust and fear.

The Processor Suits were causing a conflict on the network, so there was a rite of passage they had to undergo before they could function as the Bank. Was the enemy simply trying to destroy Hamazura, or was he trying to get him to surrender from a fear and humiliation greater than death?

It may have been divine punishment.

For believing he could play a role on this stage that was simply out of his league.

For trying to snatch the glory of victory when Aneri and the Processor Suit had done all the work.

…But when Wanted Criminal A. O. Francisca stuck the sharp end of the metal pipe into the armor gap below the jaw and tried to pry the helmet open, Hamazura grabbed his wrist.

He had not given up yet.

He would not let this end here.

Letting go of the cliff's edge would be easy, but he could not fly under his own power if he did. Lilith had been stuffed inside an abandoned car in a back alley despite doing nothing wrong, and she was now suffering from a fever without even being properly examined. He had decided he would show her the kindness of this world and that he would not let this day end on such an awful note. So what did this pain matter? Was this fear even relevant? Was any of this enough of a reason to give up on the objective he had chosen for himself without being told to by anyone?

"I will…bring back the Bank…"

This wanted criminal did not matter.

The one who needed to hear those words was Hamazura himself since he was on the verge of breaking.

"There's no room for you in my story. Don't butt in just because you have some special tool. You're just some crazy bastard that's only thinking about fighting and winning, so let's not act like you matter."

There was no response.

He heard a dull straining sound as A. O. Francisca pushed down with his full body weight despite the hands holding his wrist. The electric potential elastic tape was screaming in protest. The metal pipe with the sharp end was gradually sinking down toward the throat of Hamazura's Processor Suit.

And just as Hamazura Shiage gulped, he heard a voice.

"Proxy Message: Ahh, ahh. I was hoping I could be pampered a

while longer…but it looks like it's finally time to switch modes."

Something unbelievable happened.

But in truth, the Processor Suit's accent lights changed from red to yellow.

With an explosive sound, the wanted criminal was blasted off of Hamazura.

Hamazura had seen a leg.

It was not covered in a special material, but it could not be human skin either. It was a slender lady's leg made of smooth wood. Perhaps to prioritize the beautiful appearance, it had no ball joints, and yet it moved as smoothly as some kind of liquid.

This was impossible…or it should have been. What looked like a humanoid Processor Suit was actually a defense system built to protect the Bank, Academy City's general database. It would not have been knocked that cleanly away even if an armored truck crashed into it at full speed. Nevertheless…

"Ah…ahh?"

Confused, Hamazura turned his staticky vision around without getting up. He saw someone surprisingly nearby.

It was a small baby wrapped in a blanket. But she could not have opened the examination room on her own.

There was also a stroller made of smooth wood.

A lady in a dress was holding the handle and rocking it back and forth, but she too was made of soft wood. The design of it all was clearly in the Western style, but the smoothly shaved-down wood was a lot like a wooden statue modeled after an Eastern Tennyo.

That gave it all a weird mixture of Japanese and Western. And around them was a spiral of what looked like building blocks shaped like cylinders or triangular prisms. From there, it was like a three-dimensional puzzle. By combining them and driving in a wedge, they could become a smooth rocking horse or a giant rattle.

All of it was both weapon and shield. Was the wood texture cleverly hiding joints? Or was it wrong to view it as a wood texture at all? He could not find an answer even with the lenses and sensors of the Processor Suit…no, of the Bank.

The baby was simply surrounded and encompassed by countless wooden statues and woodcrafts.

When the baby tooted on a plastic trumpet toy in the center of that bizarre scene, the wooden lady spoke while gently rocking the stroller.

“Proxy Message: You did quite well as a babysitter, delinquent. I will praise you for that. Your skills were awkward in a number of places, but it’s the thought that counts, isn’t it?”

He did not know what this meant.

The crib, the wet nurse, and the three-dimensional puzzle of toys. Had all this woodwork come from the baby in the center?

“…Lil…ith?”

“Proxy Message: Yes, that’s right. I am really and truly the real one.”

Were they linked in some way, or was the wooden lady speaking on her own?

Regardless, the baby in the stroller raised her arms as the wooden lady spoke.

“Proxy Message: Well, if you want to precise, my name is *Nuit Ma Ahathoor Hecate Sappho Jezebel Lilith*, but that’s just too long! And pretentious!! …There are parents in every age that want to give their kids ridiculous names, but they really need to think about how the one stuck with the name will feel.”

A bizarre form lurked in the darkness.

It was the wanted criminal. It was A. O. Francisca. He could still move. The gaps of his Processor Suit’s armor oozed a red light like boiling magma.

But Lilith continued speaking without fully settling the situation.

Surrounded by so much woodwork, the baby spoke.

“Proxy Message: Now, then. I have ‘returned’. No matter whose doing this was, this is my life. So even if it means violating the very world’s decision, I will overturn that shitty ending and reach for an unquestionably happy ending. And one more thing…”

That girl turned her red and yellow trumpet toy away from Hamazura.

And she aimed it straight toward the other deadly mass contained in an identical Processor Suit.

“You need to put in some work too, *dad*!! Unless you want the babysitter to take all the best scenes for himself!!”

Hamazura heard what sounded like a liquid bursting. And it did not stop at just once. Drops were hitting the outside of the hospital window. It was a freezing December night. The wanted criminal’s attention was drawn by that noise.

And that was a mistake.

He definitely saw something there.

Far in the distance, a small and soaked figure was straddling an old broom. And that being that should not have existed in a city of science was gently holding her right hand out toward the wanted criminal with her fingers forming a handgun gesture.

Spiritual Tripping.

With that being's magic, anyone who saw that action would be hit with exactly the destructive power they imaged it would have. It all came from the target's own brain, so physical distance would not cause a drop in accuracy.

A moment later, something flashed in the dark sky.

The slaughtering beam struck A. O. Francisca and then pierced straight through the hospital.

Between the Lines 3

"…What did you do?"

In the middle of their battle, Coronzon did not hesitate to ask that question via Lola Stuart's body.

And her voice quickly rose to a roar.

"What did you do to this world I finally managed to fill with dispersion and separation!? Aiwaaaaass!!"

"Did you forget, garbage dump? I borrowed the body of Aleister's wife Rose to give them the Book of the Law in 1904. Although he

seems to have interpreted that year as when he gave the Last Judgment which brought an end to the Aeon ruled by Christianity."

"What does that-…? Wait, you don't mean…?"

"And his first daughter, Lilith, was born in that same year: 1904. So when I descended into Rose's body, she already had a new life inside her. So the alibi works. In Africa, I entered in Rose's body and existed at the same time, coordinates, and womb as Lilith. Can you really say I did not have even a moment's opportunity to mess with that life and being?"

What was a soul? The ignorant and puny humans had yet to settle on a definition, but they were always in contact with a fraction of it.

Yes, all magic was used by converting their life force into magic power.

"Lilith was doomed to die," protested Coronzon. "She could not possibly have escaped her destiny to die just a few years after birth."

"But if you could predict that from the beginning, the rest was easy. There are a variety of definitions of life and the soul, but there have been examples in the surface world. For example, Goryou Maya, the ghost girl of the Kamisato Faction. She replaced the outline of life with a scent and used that to both understand and control that outline. Her method was truly fascinating. Of course, the Russian Orthodox Church views all such examples as errors."

And it need not be anything so out there. One's life force could be controlled through meditation or special breathing methods and it could be converted into easier-to-use magic power by circulating it through the blood vessels and nerves.

So if knowledge beyond human understanding was used to go the

other way and produce a life force from magic power, it would theoretically be possible to create an uncertain life force. Just like park fountains always produced water art with the same design. Light sparked from Aiwass's palm. That was empty buffer material. Had it originally been a candlestick? A tree? It had to contain everything that composed a certain individual.

"Before she was born, I read in Lilith's structure and took her to the safety of another phase. Lilith would die soon after birth. That was determined before she was even born. *But so what?* They must have been satisfied with that sad fate because no one mentioned what happened after that death. Do you understand now? Whether or not her death was avoidable wasn't really a problem. It was the sad fate of the world to mistakenly assume that it ends with death. It was simple: I just had to add on more after her death. With the Little Match Girl and the A Dog of Flanders, everyone just gives up on them by assuming it's over once they meet their unfortunate demise. They simply had no one show up and say they would save them even if it meant overturning that rule of the world and adding on more after their death. This was all forced onto her in the first place, so no one can tell me this wasn't what she wanted."

"…!!!???"

"Of course, it would all be for naught if Lilith died in the intense cold, so I prepared her *a thick metal womb*. …But that seems to have only brought more danger. So I was relieved when she received that Caesarian section."

"Don't screw with me. Act smug all you like, but there's no way to prove that's really Lilith."

"Your sour grapes argument is as empty as some old fish bones. It was a sure thing once I had received her essence directly from Rose, but, well, finding the answer only after plenty of pointless

detours is exactly the kind of thing he would do. Would you call it transferring over the original, or making a copy like with a fax? Heh heh. But at the very least, it was Aleister's job to clench his teeth and struggle while trusting enough in the slightest shimmer of hope to continue onward. This is nothing for you to worry about. And no matter how difficult the journey appears, he will never stop. After all, that is how he has made it this far."

Aiwass spoke of his good deed with a smile of pure malice.

Yes, all of this was merely meant to smear mud on that demon's face.

"You intend to use your A. O. Francisca avatar to gain control of the Bank and thus all of Academy City's technology. That way Great Demon Coronzon can achieve checkmate on the planet even if you were launched into space on this Windowless Building. Now, can the people remaining in Academy City stop you?"

The Holy Guardian Angel whispered in a singsong voice.

And his lips twisted evilly.

"I am glad I managed to distract you so well. Although it is true the Bank was not the only distraction. Mina and I both acted as decoys as well. But perhaps that was a little too complicated for a fly-infested sink tidy."

This was the "normal" that Aiwass spoke of.

These were the colors seen by a being that provided knowledge in order to transform human history.

"That said, an exposed life force is unstable. After all, pure power will scatter in search of stability. If I had simply returned what I had protected, it would not have lasted long. That might have made for

an emotional story and an interesting one to watch, but it is a far cry from salvation."

Even now, on the distant planet's surface, baby Lilith had come down with a mysterious fever and had created a wooden wet nurse and stroller in something like a smooth three-dimensional puzzle… and she did it with her mere thoughts instead of relying on a spell process or quantum mechanics. Nothing about her could be explained within the limits of a normal body.

Plus, she was a truly innocent being who had only just been born from her mother's womb. Since she had also passed through a Holy Guardian Angel and been permeated by various powers, the power hidden within her was unfathomable.

The topic of spiritual rank was relevant here.

Her rank was different from that of an adult who was covered in sin and had lost their divinity.

Without even referencing the Adam Kadmon, it was possible to say she held endless possibilities within her.

"I made sure Aleister Crowley had to walk a long and thorny path before he could summon me and create a vessel of flesh for Lilith. Stem cells have their good and bad sides."

"How much do you know…?"

"About what?"

"I doubt Lilith alone means all that much. At least not enough for you to directly intervene. Then was she the ignition for something? For Aleister? Or for Kamijou Touma? That does sound like the kind of subject they would like!!"

Aiwass laughed quietly.

The Holy Guardian Angel did not dignify the shouting demon with a response.

Now was the time for blessings.

“Aleister Crowley, my contractor. No matter what kind of human you are, you must never stop working toward being happy.”

He made a proclamation.

He seemed to be viewing the end of a great current that flowed from the Battle of Blythe Road – that showdown between history’s greatest magicians – to today.

“You did well to clench your teeth and continue walking down that thorny path. The angel bearing the number 93 shall give you a reward equal to the blood, sweat, and tears you shed in that lonely darkness. The laws of the world are of no consequence and the rules set by the existing gods can eat shit. Now, lift your head, face forward, stand tall, and accept it. Accept the blessing you have drawn to yourself with your own unending effort!!”

Do not be fooled by the demon’s temptation.

A miracle cannot be brought about by readily abandoning all effort.

It is only found at the very end of a path paved with unwavering conviction. A transcendent being will only reach out their hand toward those who have continually challenged their hardships so relentlessly that their shed blood has paved a path through the world.

Chapter 4: Are you Prepared to Distort the Laws of the World? – Human.

Part 1

He was panicking.

The spiky-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma was aware of that as he ran through the late night city.

Smoke rose from a hospital so thickly that the countless raindrops could not soak it and wash it from the air. At the moment, that had become an unmistakable landmark from anywhere in Academy City, so he ran toward it through the light cold rain.

Settling things with Aleister in the Windowless Building during the day was all well and good, but some time had passed and the situation had completely changed.

And he should have realized something.

If everything Aleister Crowley said was true, then the relationship diagram with Lola Stuart in the center had to be entirely reevaluated. All of the assumptions about who was safe and who was dangerous that had built up from there had lost all meaning.

“Oh, honestly!!”

Aleister had gone on ahead in her silver-haired girl form. Of course she had. Between land, sea, and air, the most important one to secure was air superiority. That broom allowed her to fly around in

the air like some kind of cheat code, so he could never keep up with her speed.

And of all things, their destination was that hospital that was always taking care of Kamijou.

After he climbed the chain-link fence and jumped inside the grounds, he saw *that*.

Something was waiting on the asphalt in the cold rain…

"Wh-…what?"

Inside the yellow-glowing Processor Suit…no, inside the humanoid Bank, Hamazura Shiage groaned within the hospital that had been badly damaged by the blast.

Something odd had happened.

None of the windows along the hallway were broken, yet from the point A. O. Francisca had been standing, the inner wall, an empty hospital room, and all the walls from there had been utterly destroyed like a small airplane had crashed through them. There was of course no sign of the wanted criminal and rebar, power cables, oxygen supply pipes, and such were sticking out of the breaks in the walls.

The baby seated in the smooth woodwork stroller lightly waved around her red and yellow trumpet toy. The wooden wet nurse in a dress spoke up like an interpreter.

"Proxy Message: There is nothing strange about this because that was not physical damage. No laser or beam shot through here. A. O. Francisca was filled with that illusion, so his body *jumped to the side* all on its own, breaking through the walls and hospital rooms

on the way out of the building.”

“Eh? Ah?”

Lilith in the stroller did not seem particularly irritated by Hamazura’s dumb voice.

In fact, she narrowed her eyes happily.

“Proxy Message: Perhaps it is for the best that you do not understand. Magic is not something to feel proud about knowing. As someone who was crushed and killed by the friction between phases, I have the right to complain about it. And if you don’t know magic, that means you have lived an upstanding life without trying to cheat, my awkward babysitter.”

With that said, the stroller turned and carried Lilith off somewhere else.

Even if she was really just a baby in a blanket, she still managed to act imposing.

“H-hey, where are you going…?”

“Proxy Message: Oh? You’re still worried about me even after learning I am a monster baby? Carrying a big baby around would only wear you out.”

He was supposed to be in the very center of it all, but the dumb delinquent did not understand anything of real importance here. Still, when he heard what Lilith said, Hamazura stood back up under his own power. If thinking about it was not enough to figure it out, then he would have to go see it with his own eyes.

There was only one thing he could trust here.

No matter what bizarre things she was doing, that baby was

undoubtedly Lilith. And without needing Aneri to perform any calculations, he knew the baby he had been protecting all this time did not have any ulterior motives or ill will.

Lilith raised her small hands when she saw the knight in special armor standing beside her stroller.

“Proxy Message: Your straightforward honesty is both admirable and foolish. But, well, I like that a lot more than someone who tries to act the intellectual and ends up drowning in their own schemes.”

“?”

“Proxy Message: That is a virtue of yours, but you should also learn to be a bit more cautious. Thanks to that, your girlfriend seems to be in a very bad mood. Just make sure you do not get me wrapped up in your flirting.”

“No, you have it all wrong! She might have that bewitching young woman made of wood speaking for her, but it’s actually that baby there! Remember that this is Lilith and focus on your desire to protect! Protect, okay!?”

While the dented suit clamored on and on like that to the miniskirt Santa who had shown up, the wooden stroller continued down the hall, the wooden wet nurse in a dress carried it down the stairs, and they all made their way out into the cold rain. When Lilith saw Hamazura grab a forgotten plastic umbrella from the umbrella stand at the entrance and open it, she raised her hands in satisfaction and the stroller moved underneath it.

And outside, the miracle baby saw…

In front of the hospital on that December night, heaven was

weeping.

A magician had stopped flying with a broom and instead placed her feet on the ground.

It was Aleister Crowley.

That human had once fought a battle that washed out blood with blood, used that battle as fuel, and utterly tore apart and eradicated the Golden magic cabal. Now, she gently grabbed the wide brim of her witch-like hat and pulled it deep over her eyes.

The cold raindrops had soaked her clothing, her hair, and her skin.

She did not bother to wipe away the liquid running down her cheeks as she encountered a phenomenon that could not be explained using the world's rules of causality.

She recognized vestiges of the past in the stroller made from wood that interlocked like a three-dimensional puzzle, the similarly-made toys floating around the stroller, and most of all in the wooden lady in a dress.

The stroller contained a baby that should not have existed.

Flanked on either side by a member of the city's dark side, that life breathed and opened her eyes of her own will.

"Dad…"

She approached.

She rolled over.

And…

A mercilessly full-powered swing hit that human in the cheek.

The baby used a rattle far too large for a baby.

However, it was made of the same sort of wood used for bats, so a solid hit would be more of a disaster than a punch. After that struck Aleister in the side of the face, a rocking horse and a miniature piano crashed into her. Finally, the wooden lady who had pushed the stroller took a running start and hit her with a dropkick that had the wooden figure's full weight behind it.

Aleister was hit by every attack.

The ones most flustered by this unexpected turn of events were the outsiders watching on.

Hamazura Shiage and Kamijou Touma cried out at the exact same time.

"Ahhhh!? What was that!? Lilith, wait! What are you doing to that girl!?"

"Aleister, what did you do this time!? It's time you learned what was accepted by the eccentrics of your Golden cabal won't fly in modern society!!"

"Hm?"

"Hm?"

Hamazura and Kamijou exchanged a puzzled glance in the cold rain.

Before they could answer any of their questions, Lilith rudely pointed her red and yellow trumpet toy toward her "father" and borrowed the wet nurse's voice to yell at her.

"Proxy Message: How immature can you be, you bastard!? Why do you look like that? I was hoping for the emotional reunion after a miraculous revival, so why are you looking even girlier than me!?

How am I supposed to face a father who went through a surprise sex change and might even be cuter than his own daughter!? If you could have done this normally, this would have been the perfect tearjerker, but you just had to ruin it, didn't you!?"

"Um, if we're talking about immaturity, Lilith, I think we also need to address how you were a baby just a bit ago and now you're causing all sorts of paranormal things and acting like you know better than everyone else…"

"Silence, babysitter!! Whose side are you on, delinquent!!!???"

She was being entirely unreasonable, but if you analyzed how Lilith blushed, swung her arms around, and acted like this was a betrayal, you would discover the shocking truth that she had actually grown quite attached to Hamazura. But Hamazura was dumb and he secretly rejected Aneri's offer to display the result of some calculations. The world was a complicated place.

How was a daughter supposed to react when she showed up to the emotional reunion with her father only to find that father had transformed into an incredibly immature and cheeky little sister character? Was this more bad luck for the human who would transform any failure and defeat into her own power? The situation was simply the worst, but this was no time to be relaxing.

Yes, none of this was over yet.

Aleister had descended to the surface and Lilith had left the building because they had some other objective.

A form was curled up and straining to move on the wet asphalt a short distance away. The Processor Suit was identical to Hamazura Shiage's which was switching back and forth between yellow and red. A wanted criminal wore that humanoid form of the Bank. A. O. Francisca was there giving off a flickering red light.

However, his suit did not seem to be fully functioning either. That suit had taken Hamazura's fist which could have punched through a nuclear shelter, a kick from Lilith's "wet nurse", and Aleister's magic. Those few but powerful hits to crucial parts of the suit seemed to have done serious damage.

Presumably as some kind of safety measure a white gas sprayed out. It may have been steam from the joints or a coolant.

But that must not have been enough to contain the damage because the visor cracked with the sound of thin ice splitting.

All the red lines covering the Processor Suit vanished.

And it all led up to a light tone much like a small bell made of glass.

A. O. Francisca's hidden face was finally revealed. But Hamazura only tilted his head when he saw the answer. Yes, he had started this as an outsider.

"Dammit…"

So it was Kamijou Touma who spoke up instead.

He recalled what Aleister had said after becoming a silver-haired girl.

They had been unable to regroup with magical Tsuchimikado Motoharu or scientific Misaka Mikoto. Someone was getting in their way. So they had to figure out who their suspects were by thinking about who could do something like that.

That meant it had to be someone with knowledge of both sides.

Tsuchimikado Maika and Index were too far on one side or the other.

“Thinking back, Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s actions were odd.”

Which meant…

The bundle of papers the size of yen notes…the incomplete protective charms being used as a litmus test withered and fell apart in Aleister’s hand.

“I am not talking about after you entered the Windowless Building. I mean before that, in that perfectly ordinary back alley. When I was preparing to take care of Karasuma Fran there, how did his bullet arrive in time? How did he think to go there with no hint whatsoever? The answer is simple: *That was not a perfectly ordinary back alley.* What looked like a normal metal door or manhole may have been merely disguised in that form at some point. Yes, to contain something that had to be protected even if that meant keeping out my Underline and restricting any reports back to me, the board chairman. That back alley must have contained the hidden entrance to a development space for the Processor Suit form of the Bank. I guarantee it.”

Tsuchimikado had supposedly been searching for a bargaining chip to protect his stepsister from Aleister. And what better bargaining chip was there than the Bank which collected all Academy City’s knowledge? But before he could swipe that, he had run into Aleister himself like the human had been waiting for him, so the plan had failed. Neither one had intended it. It had been the worst possible coincidence. Tsuchimikado had abandoned his plan, saved the girl who would act as a contact with the Anglican Church, and decided to escape outside the city instead.

But that meant Tsuchimikado Motoharu was not the one behind all this.

Then who was it that had reached the Processor Suit in advance and thus met all the conditions to cause this incident? Who had

managed to interfere with Mikoto on the science side and Tsuchimikado on the magic side?

They had their answer.

"*So it was Fran after all!?*" shouted Kamijou. "*Come to think of it, you did work for Lola Stuart, didn't you!?*"

Part 2

Serial killers would not suddenly think to attack someone they had never seen or met from a country on the other side of the globe. Whether in reality or online, they would have to have some kind of contact with them, no matter how shallow. Otherwise, nothing would inspire the desire to kill.

However, Hamazura Shiage had no way of knowing when this contact had occurred.

It had happened early that morning. It had ended in failure, but Kamijou and the others had originally made their way to the city's outer wall so that Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Maika could escape with Karasuma Fran.

And they had indeed heard the following exchange just outside the bus's window.

"Hey, mister. Is this spot good?"

"Hamazura-kun, I am really grateful since we're shorthanded at the moment, but why does a kid your age know how to operate a crane? Don't you need national qualifications for that???"

“…It’s weird setting one of these up after using heavy machinery to steal so many of them.”

“Now I’m worried about your past!!”

So she had seen him.

That was why the wanted criminal had considered him as a candidate target. They should have never met, but that dumb delinquent’s face had still come to mind.

Of course, there may have been other reasons. For example, *her many antennae* may have detected Aneri’s presence hopping between all the devices around Hamazura. That way she could obtain a decoy with little connection to herself but who had enough power to not be defeated too easily.

“At the root of this all was Lola with her body hijacked as Coronzon’s avatar,” spat out Girl Aleister. “Someone who worked directly for her would have been in contact with Coronzon in secret, so it makes perfect sense that she would have messed with the girl’s body. And without the girl even noticing.”



Did the strained movements come from the Processor Suit malfunctioning? Or was there something wrong with the person wearing it?

With the Processor Suit hiding her girly bodylines and height, Karasuma Fran held her hands to her own face and then pressed her palms against the asphalt that was dark and wet with cold rain. Was she trying to gather up the pieces of the broken visor? That was Hamazura's first guess, but he was wrong.

That demon-possessed girl did not even insist on bipedal movement.

With a low bestial roar, she pressed all four limbs against the ground. Her head hung low, showing off the top of her head, but then the spiky-haired high school boy gasped.

Kamijou had realized that this girl had worn a hoodie at all times. With the hood over her head, he had never actually seen the top and back of her head.

There was a face there.

Three blood-red jewels were embedded there, forming the kind of face seen in a child's doodle.

"Al203 with a touch of Cr. …In other words, pigeon blood."

Aleister gave a snorting laugh as she mentioned the alternate name of the highest-quality ruby.

He viewed the demon residing in the girl's hair.

And he seemed to mock his own past deeds.

"That demon appeared within a magic circle drawn with the blood of three doves. I suppose this is meant to be the same. And if they

let those sweet words manipulate them, anyone would immediately fall to that influence."

"…"

"Come to think of it, were you also the one who invited the Anglican recovery team just outside of the city so you could cross the wall and escape? I am guessing you would have chosen the Amakusas led by their Saint, but…I see. That answers another mystery. I had been wondering how the physical vessel of Lola Stuart managed to enter the Windowless Building so easily. …Curse those diligent Asians. Did they let this happen without knowing what was 'inside'?"

Fran's head jerkily swayed.

That crimson was even more sinister than the Processor Suit's warning lights. It looked like a red-eyed and mouthed beast tilting its head.

Even a layman like Hamazura could tell something by looking at that girl wearing the wreckage of a suit.

"…She isn't in control."

He had no reason to defend her.

He could have played the victim card and simply called her a hated enemy.

But he did it without even thinking.

"That's nothing like with Aneri. There's nothing worse than a supposed 'mirror of truth' that only maliciously spits out lies and falsehoods. We can't let that evil continue!!"

"Of course not. Fran never would have used the name A. O.

Francisca otherwise. Even with that thing ruling her and messing with her mind, she still did her best to leave some kind of hint."

A sinister howl rang through the moonless night of frigid rain.

Immediately, a great wave of deadly presences pushed in from all directions. They were organism weapons that had disguised themselves in the 130cm and 32kg form best suited for this civilized metropolis. They were Mimetic Predators. Spiky-haired Kamijou Touma groaned when he saw the deadly weapons that had taken on the forms of so many different kinds of girls.

"This makes sense too when you know Fran is at the center of it all. She took inspiration from the Kamisato Faction to create a method of managing such a large battle force."

"This is the Lock Ness experiment." Girl Aleister remained entirely composed. "I never did master that, but as a side effect, a few half-formed spirits apparently welled up all on their own. Heh heh. Although everyone made a huge fuss about them being a surviving dinosaur and then some third-rate newspaper gave them such an adorable name. In Karasuma Fran's case, it seems she is intentionally guiding that magic experiment to failure to mass-produce monsters with immediate strength and chewing power. … That said, taking a truth no one managed to discover for so long and redefining it as 'something able to take on any form' is quite a unique idea. First implants in the head and now the Loch Ness monster. Was this all meant to match her image as a UFO girl?"

"Proxy Message: So what are you going to do about it, dad?"

Lilith seemed to challenge Aleister by borrowing the mouth of the wooden wet nurse that's mixture of Japanese and Western made look like a Tennyo or a lady in a dress.

"Different avatars have different levels of authority and different

roles. It is a master and slave relationship, so there is a clear difference in precedence. The familiarity with Lola who has been controlled for many long years will be much greater than with this Fran who would only have made contact a few years ago at best."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" asked Hamazura. "Avatars? Like in online games? So is it like when you train your main swordsman, a gunman meant for ranged battles, and a priest for use against undead enemies, but you still end up training the main one to a higher level than the others???"

"Proxy Message: Do not cluelessly butt in, babysitter. Your example is actually harder for me to picture. …But thanks to this, the control over that girl seems weaker than for *my little sister*. If you see killing her as the only option instead of taking a sample of this weaker toxin, then there is nothing you can do *next time*, be it an antidote or a vaccine. Right, dad?"

With a sticky sound, the many organism weapons approached the quadrupedal beast. That group had artificially reproduced just the violent side of the Kamisato Faction. This was the return of the great force that had greatly shaken Academy City.

And the silver-haired human responded while watching it happen.

"Then this is a touchstone. I will test everything I can here to ensure I can make an effective attack *next time*, Coronzon."

Part 3

The first move was made not by Hamazura or Fran but by the Mimetic Predator cytoplasmic organism weapons surrounding

them.

The lack of any real sense of fear must have shortened the time needed to think.

Hamazura tossed the cheap umbrella to Takitsubo in her midriff-baring miniskirt Santa outfit so she could keep it held above the smooth woodwork stroller.

“Take care of Lilith.”

“Proxy Message: That is not a job for your pure girlfriend.”

For some reason, Lilith made an exasperated comment.

A moment later, the gaps of the armor in Hamazura’s Processor Suit were dyed fully red.

An Aneri-guided kick caught an organism weapon in the very center. His foot sank into the flat chest of what looked like a small girl in a frog raincoat and launched her backwards to take out more of the organism weapons with her.

That was the strategy he had worked out before, but if he kept this up, his armor would be worn down through contact with them.

And while he could knock them down to temporarily stop them, he did not know if he could permanently stop them. They were simply taking on a human disguise and did not actually have human organs, so their apparent vital points were meaningless.

“Orah!!”

That was when Kamijou Touma dashed through the rain.

When his right palm struck the belly of a Mimetic Predator rolling on the wet asphalt, the organism weapon finally melted like cheese

over a flame and dissolved into the rainwater.

“! Can you use that to destroy the jewels on that Fran girl’s head!?”

“If I can touch them without getting my hand bitten off! But that’s a lot like snatching the jewel from a lion’s collar!”

Was this a step forward or a step back?

With as scraped up as Kamijou was, his right hand looked pretty unreliable, but Hamazura decided it was better than nothing.

Hamazura would knock them down while Kamijou finished them off.

(Is there nothing we can use as a weapon…?)

Hamazura clicked his tongue and looked around the parking lot. Thanks to the patients arguing over at the entrance, the parking lot was not entirely empty, but it was still past three in the morning. There were far fewer cars than at a supermarket during the day. Among those, Aneri ignored the obvious cars and instead placed markers on things like the metal poles or thick chains in front of parking spots or manhole covers.

But perhaps Hamazura should have been more aware of the risk he made by taking his eyes of the battle right in front of him.

He heard a straining sound.

And then the many organism weapons fled to the left and right, like the parting of a sea. They had been so reckless before, but they were afraid of something. And that something raced down the opened pathway at blinding speed.

“Fra-…!?”

Her Processor Suit's lights had gone out, so it had to have ceased functioning.

And yet.

He was hit by as much pressure as a catapult meant to break down castle walls.

It sounded just like an explosion.

A. O. Francisca…no, Karasuma Fran destroyed the dull armor joints with her own strength as she launched a fist toward Hamazura's visor like an artillery shell.

Without Aneri's assistance, that would have smashed the special armor along with his skull.

By moving his arms and legs in accordance with the markers, he managed to supply a slight blow to the bottom of the incoming fist's wrist and diverted it just barely out of the way. As the fist shot by overhead, Hamazura swept Fran's ankles out from under her, grabbed her slender arm, and slammed her back-first into the asphalt.

With a rumble, the parking lot ground shattered and sank down.

No, it did not stop there. The overloaded special armor finally reached its limit and completely split and broke apart. The suit may have read in the electrical potential difference on the surface of her skin because the girl inside was exposing her soft skin with a bikini. She may have been using some kind of gel or cream to more efficiently read her bioelectricity because the way the raindrops bounced off her skin was not normal.

But the girl's expression did not cloud over at all as she lay on her back.

At this point, the Processor Suit may have been no more than a hindrance holding her back.

No, it was a more fundamental issue.

(Tch!! Looking at her expression isn't going to help regardless! Our real enemy is the pigeon blood "face" made by the three jewels in her head!!)

The Al2O3…no, demon-possessed girl raised a bestial roar.

A closer look showed there was no connection between the roar and Fran's own breathing and throat movements. It was unclear how it worked, but the "voice" was coming from the jewels on top of her head.

She got up like a clockwork doll.

Hamazura threw a kick on reflex. He aimed for the girl's face which was at about waist height. Only after throwing it did he realize Fran's face and body were no longer protected by armor, but now was not the time to worry about that.

He felt the blow land, but his Processor Suit's red warning only strengthened.

A fist immediately flew as a counterattack.

Fran could not harness the strength of her legs or hips for this attack, but when her small fist struck Hamazura in the lower belly, he and the sturdy Processor Suit were launched 7 or 8 meters back. If he had not twisted his body and changed his landing point based on Aneri's instructions, he would have crashed into Lilith and Takitsubo with the momentum of an artillery shell.

(Are you serious? How was the Processor Suit actually holding her back!?)

“Don’t think of Fran like a normal girl just because she looks slender. You might have some extra armor protecting you, but she’ll take off an arm or a leg if you let your guard down.”

He received some good advance from Everyone’s Big Brother: Kamijou Touma.

This was probably the kind of advice that would save his life.

“Be careful! Fran was a magician who specialized in star and space magic. I can’t even imagine how dangerous she is now that her power is being boosted!!”

“If you can’t imagine it, how am I supposed to get what you mean!? I’m having trouble picturing this, so what actually does star magic mean!? Don’t tell me she’s going to summon a meteor or something!!”

“Oh, but Fran did drop that giant space sta-…”

“That was supposed to be a joke! If you’re just going to give some horrifying example with a straight face, then stop talking!!”

Hamazura gulped when he heard a straining sound.

It came from Fran who was down on all fours. She kicked her right leg at the wet asphalt like a bull preparing to charge and the second face on the top of her head was shaking. But with her Processor Suit destroyed and only a bikini and her soft skin remaining, how was that girl producing that sound? And that previous attack did not seem like something she could pull off without mechanical assistance.

Which meant…

“She’s had her muscles and skeleton messed with…? No, it could be worse. If she *only* had the limiters in her mind removed, who knows

how much that attack just now messed up her insides!?”

“Dad.”

“It is unusual to hear of someone’s body growing feebler after being possessed by a demon. When a power similar-but-distinct-to Telesma is poured into the preexisting pathways for their life force, the avatar will grow stronger. I suppose it is like an instant version of a Shakti master. It is an easy way to draw out plenty of power, but it is still no more than a forced emulation. The program is being forced to run while ignoring any compatibility issues with the OS, so who knows what kind of errors will occur. This is not suited for long-term use. If the pathways for her life force are fried, she may not even be able to continue living.”

The way Fran kicked at the ground with her right leg, snorted, and slowly shook her head was just like a bull eyeing its prey.

Before she could target Takitsubo or Lilith in her stroller, Hamazura smashed a nearby car’s window with his elbow and pulled out a heat-insulating sheet made of what looked like aluminum.

When he beat the air with it so it would spread out and draw the bull’s eyes, Fran kicked off the wet asphalt with all four limbs and mercilessly charged toward Hamazura.

Part 4

And.

Outside the chain-link fence, another pair confronted each other on another battlefield.

They were both colored white.

One of them, the #1 with white hair and red eyes, spoke with exasperation in his voice.

“I really don’t think this is my specialty.”

But the other one did not reply.

The white figure simply stood there with an unnatural light glittering in her eyes.

No, that was no mere light.

Two triangles irregularly overlapped in the iris area to form a bizarre design.

And that form spoke.

“Chapter 3, Verse 8: Area scan complete. John’s Pen mode will now exterminate the enemy.”

Part 5

They should have imagined the possibility.

Lola Stuart was Archbishop of the Anglican Church.

The fact that she had been corrupted would entirely change the relationship chart that Kamijou had built up over time and used to determine who was safe and who was a threat.

Even Karasuma Fran had been negatively influenced as a magician

who worked directly for Lola.

Then what about this case?

The grimoire library whose perfect memory had been used to memorize 103,000 grimoires.

Index Librorum Prohibitorum.

And who was it that had the physical key to forcibly control Index?

A pure white beam sliced through the night sky as it swept by over Kamijou and the others' heads.

It did not matter who it had been aimed at.

Nor did it matter that someone flying through the air might have controlled the wind to knock the girl who produced the beam toward *a more appropriate opponent*.

At any rate, she fell right next to the spiky-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma.

The short girl had long silver hair and wore a teacup-like nun's habit with gold embroidery on white fabric.

Kamijou held his side and groaned in pain.

"I thought everyone had just been separated when that idiot Aleister launched his rocket, but you were taken over too, Index!?"

"She is not an avatar. Lola…no, Coronzon is merely abusing the preexisting external control device."

"It's the same either way!!"

With Fran and Index, they would be attacked on either side. And

both girls possessed brutal firepower. Kamijou and the others could easily be caught in a hopeless crossfire here in the parking lot.

“Search out the control circle,” whispered the human who pulled her witch’s hat deep over her eyes. “It has to have appeared somewhere on the grimoire library’s body. And you must have done it once before. *Even if you no longer remember it, the facts engraved in history have not changed.*”

Kamijou felt an intense pain run through his right temple.

He had no way of determining whether it was a real pain or a phantom pain coming from a part of him that no longer existed. Regardless, he held his head and staggered while doing his best to face his enemy.

An emotionless face.

A bizarre pattern in the eyes.

He had no memory or recollection of this. And yet the silhouette of the missing puzzle piece in his head seemed to be shouting at him.

Do not allow this to continue.

Rescue that captured girl no matter what.

Part 6

Meanwhile.

A lithe black cat ruled over the late night of Academy City as cold rain poured down.

Mourning clothes were decorated with cat ears and a cat tail. The black cat witch held a thick book in front of her quite large chest.

It really was an original grimoire which could overturn the laws of physics. No matter how much rain hit it, the cheap collection of loose leaf paper repelled the drops like it was made of plastic.

Mina Mathers.

She was the one who gave humanity knowledge in the form of a grimoire. She was the lady who had been freed from the bonds of a giant parallel processing machine at the hands of Aiwass. She was moving toward the center of the commotion.

She honestly had no clear reason for her existence at the moment.

She was no more than a being who had been doomed to destruction but then saved by the whim of that Holy Guardian Angel.

She was an impossible parameter, unnecessary code.

But perhaps because she had retained the nature of the Thoth Tarot, Mina Mathers realized *the value of that superfluity* more accurately than anyone else.

(In the overall script, I may be no more than some garbage data, an alphanumeric string someone forgot to delete.)

She was not being cynical or self-deprecating.

The black cat witch was remaining positive as she came to understand her own “weapon”.

(But that means I could easily become a bug that freezes up the unfeeling pre-established harmony. Humans can be self-conscious, so they dislike viewing themselves as mere dust or garbage, but the

truth is different. Every man and every woman is a star. No one in the world is unnecessary and everyone has an important meaning. Those sound like convenient lyrics targeting the world-weary, but if every single person is a crucial gear for the world, then no matter how hard the human race works, the most they can do is help turn the gears in the politicians' clockwork machine."

In other words.

Her conclusion was as follows:

(It is the being that should not have existed – that seemingly insignificant bit – that truly acts as the lock that freezes up the colossal program. The unnecessary garbage functions as a powerful safety device to stop the clockwork machine from continuing on when it begins moving in the wrong direction!)

The instant she entered the hospital grounds, Mina Mathers felt like all the puzzle pieces were gathering.

You must not forget.

That black cat witch held a legitimate original grimoire in front of her chest.

Part 7

Kamijou Touma vs. Index.

That boy could no longer remember the battle which could be seen as the "beginning" for his current self, but he was just about to repeat that clash here.

However, a figure in black moved between them.

It was Mina Mathers.

She directly faced Index, who was being externally controlled, and she opened her original grimoire made up of loose leaf paper.

The view seemed to fill a certain individual's entire visual world.

"Memorize this, grimoire library. Fulfill your original role like a machine and memorize the forbidden knowledge of your 103,001st grimoire."

This was just how she worked.

She had no way of rejecting it.

Index had a perfect memory.

Whether she wanted to or not, everything in front of her would be etched into her mind.

"And have my toxin burn through the pathways of your soft brain. Even if this is entirely superfluous and no more than unnecessary garbage, even the slightest damage is enough. Just like flipping one Thoth card upside down, this poison will act as a medicine. Lola Stuart…no, Great Demon Coronzon. With my true freedom, I will fry the wicked controller you have embedded in this girl!!!!!!"

It was like watching a doll as the gears slipped out of place.

The girl convulsed like a high-voltage current was running along her spine and then she collapsed to the rain-soaked hospital parking lot.

"Index!?"

“Do not worry. I merely removed the malicious program.”

The black cat witch spoke in a refreshing voice to the boy who rushed over and supported the limp girl.

Then she whirled around.

It happened just as the wooden wet nurse supporting the baby’s wooden stroller leaned unsteadily toward Aleister.

“You may be used to confronting a traumatic illusion, but do you fear actually touching her as a part of reality once more?”

“…”

“Or do you think regaining *this* means losing your excuse for destroying the Golden cabal since that was triggered by your daughter’s death?”

If resurrection had been an option from the beginning, then Aleister lost the primary pillar for his revenge taken at the Battle of Blythe Road. This could always be written off as more of the wandering so often seen in his life of failure and defeat, but those caught in the middle of it could hardly accept that.

…That was how it may have looked.

But the reality was different.

If Aleister had not hated magic and walked that thorny path, he never could have arrived at this overlapping phase that Aiwass had prepared. Lilith had been no more than a copied life force created by reading in the diagrams of her blood vessels and nerves, so he had needed to develop the technology necessary to create a vessel of flesh that could stabilize her. Only after reaching that point could he play the resurrection card. Otherwise, it would have remained as a cheap tearjerker where he threw that exposed life force out

into the open world, knowing she would fall apart on her own before long, all so they could be miraculously reunited for just a brief moment.

And whether she was resurrected or not, the actions of Mathers, Westcott, and the other Golden cabal members would still have brought death to people around the world who were in the same circumstances as Lilith. In fact, if he had let the Golden cabal survive and thrive, it would have grown much larger. If he could face that tragedy and accept it as long as his own daughter was resurrected, then Aleister had no right to call himself a father.

If Lilith's death was unavoidable, then the deaths wrought by his revenge should also have been unavoidable.

It may have been insulting to those cabal members who all had stories about them worthy of calling legends, but Mina Mathers could only view the destruction of the Golden cabal as their just deserts. Their human pride showed through from the moment they attempted to master magic, bend the laws of the world, and cut themselves free from cause and effect so they alone could escape retribution.

Also, Aleister had not trusted in the righteousness of god even before he aimed to become a magician. If the Golden cabal had constructed a spell to escape divine punishment, that human would never have allowed them to continue. When those transcendent ones attempted to wash all sin from their flesh and wield mighty power, he would have pursued them to the ends of the earth. It was laughable to think one could fully escape the laws of the world simply by fooling god. If he could not say that, then he was not Aleister Crowley.

It had all been necessary.

Thus, even if his life had been a humiliating series of failures and

defeats, he had nothing to be ashamed of. No part of the path Aleister walked had been extraneous. Aiwass had prepared the opportunity, but could a human in a suit and tie have taken advantage of it, could it have reached a human passed out in a back alley after a night of cheap drinks, or could a human who compromised for the immediate advantage before his eyes have accomplished it? The answer was no. Until this very day, he had never stopped thinking about his lost family and had worked himself to the bone for those being tormented by the same unfairness. He had known it would mean reducing himself to a brutal villain walking a path of violence, but he had never thrown out his iron will. All so he could be given Lilith from a different phase and so he could give her a vessel of flesh. Who had both the technology needed to grasp at that tiny opportunity and the powerful will needed to protect someone from the malice of the world? Only *that* Aleister.

Even if the 7 billion other humans broke down to tears, Aleister here was different.

He had everything.

He had nothing that could be called the strongest and he had no talent implanted in his mind. It was all knowledge that he had built up from the foundation with his bloody hands and that he had learned from his many setbacks and losses. He had been trained up because he did not fear failure and he had been given many lessons because he was willing to view his failures head on. And that had led to further strength. If he had chosen that path because he had talent, he never would have taken a step outside the realm in which he could naturally win. His horsepower was far greater than your average athlete or pianist. That human had begun by splitting the world between magic and science, effectively destroying the very realm suited to his own talents. He had smashed the greenhouse that would hinder his possibility of growth and instead

improved himself in the unlimited wasteland.

So why would he hesitate now?

“I have an oracle from the higher being that sent this grimoire into the world.”

The black cat witch remained entirely businesslike.

Was that because she was a type of tarot that simply displayed a result?

“No matter what kind of human you are, you must never stop working toward being *happy*.”

She stayed true to her role as messenger.

Mina Mathers repaid her debt through that role.

Of course, this decision to continue to obey her administrator after being freed was entirely her own. If, like that great demon, she had chosen to harm others just because she had been liberated, she would only have proven her own wickedness.

“You did well enduring those hard times. You were all alone, clenching your teeth, and misunderstood by all, but you continued searching blindly through that unreasonable darkness. So Aiwass shall turn it all around. He promises you he will provide a blessing worthy of the many years of pain and shed blood, sweat, and tears you carry, so prepare yourself.”

It was a repeat of 1904.

In that fateful year, Magician Aleister Crowley had been given some words that greatly changed his life and he had also been given a new life, even as he knew it would be destroyed.

That was when he had chosen that thorny path, but another change had finally arrived. This was different from that path of failure and defeat where he accepted all pain and humiliation. This time, he was on the rails to success and victory.

“And I would like to add a message of my own.”

The processing device and card set that had originally formed Mina Mathers had been put together by that human to prove he was on the right path.

She had changed form and now relied on a different medium, but the black cat witch spoke all the same.

And there was a definite smile behind her thin veil.

“Do not fear and run from being *happy*, Aleister Crowley.”

That was when Lilith reached her limit.

She had originally been thrown out into the outside world as nothing more than a life force – the most basic of basics – with no physical body. She was never going to last long like that.

The floating rocking horse, piano, and other toys fell apart and dropped to the wet ground. The smooth woodwork stroller tilted and the wedges fell from the wooden wet nurse pushing it. Instead of a change, this was better called a return to normal. After being protected by so many mysterious phenomena, Lilith returned to being a mere baby wrapped in a blanket.

Only that immature life remained in the human’s arms.

It was like a repeat of the past.

That life wrapped in a blanket innocently reached her tiny hands toward her parent’s face. Lilith of course knew what that meant.

She knew, but she repeated it anyway. She was telling that human to overcome this moment and continue on. She had set up that hurdle.

Only silence followed.

Then Aleister slowly – truly slowly – reached a trembling hand toward that fingertip.

The magician clearly saw his own daughter's hand firmly grasp the outstretched fingers.

And…

And…

And…

Part 8

Electricity flashed around the human named Aleister Crowley.

Something that had been frozen solid for ages had regained the scorching heat of an electric furnace capable of melting special steel.

Part 9

It was far too simple.

While watching Fran charge toward Hamazura on all fours, Kamijou was shocked to see that magician calmly take a certain pose with just one arm. It did not help that she could not have looked less like a father in a school uniform blazer, a witch's hat, and a cloak.

Aleister's Spiritual Tripping was a spell that hit the target with the destructive power they imagined when they saw the gesture.

But normally, there should have been no way to tell if she was holding a katana, a saber, a wooden sword, or a metal pipe. The ability to accurately instill people with an image of texture, sheen, weight, and hardness may have been proof of her top rate skill.

That skill was why the gesture naturally brought something to mind.

All she did was raise one hand to mime peering through a pair of binoculars. Even if it was clear those were military binoculars used to designate attack coordinates via laser or GPS, it should not have been clear just what kind of attack it would be. Would it be fired from a ship's guns or dropped from a bomber? Would it be an anti-surface missile or an aerial bomb? Nevertheless, the precise image was drawn in the spiky-haired high school boy's mind even though he had never seen the real thing.

Without thinking.

Truly without thinking, Kamijou Touma forgot all about his own injuries and shouted in disbelief.

"An aerial support…*Big Bang Bomb*!!!???"

This was only targeted at the Mimetic Predators crawling around the area. And they had the misfortune to be biologically based instead of being inorganic weapons. They too could "picture" the weapon, so it was drawn with hopeless detail in the back of their

minds. There was an explosion that only they could sense.

That 10^{-44} seconds may have been more valuable than an eternity.

Cold rain continued to pour down on the late night parking lot. Physically, not a single leaf floating in a puddle was harmed and not a drop of water was evaporated, but hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of organism weapons were blown into the air, swept away, vaporized, and thoroughly contaminated to the last cell. This was not just on a planetary scale. This blew away the entire "world" including every last galaxy and nebula. For those chosen as a target, there was no escape. The meaning of what was "possible" was cruelly distorted. This far exceeded a neutron bomb or pure fusion bomb and added a much-too-evil attack to human history.

"*How naive.*"

But Aleister whispered.

That severe human had more to say.

"*Blasting Rod. In other words, that power will be multiplied tenfold from my opponent's point of view.*"

She finally exceeded the limits of the existing universe.

This had originally been a secret technique meant to take on every last Magic God at once. Even if the one taking the damage had a limit to their imagination, her enemy's mind would be mercilessly blown away by enough energy to create the universe ten times over.

Down on all fours, Karasuma Fran…no, the red jewel demon borrowing that poor victim's body forgot all about charging toward Hamazura in his Processor Suit and tensed up when she thought about what this meant.

Why was she alone unharmed?

That was not Coronzon's doing. Aleister had called her a touchstone. She was practice for saving a possessed avatar. That was why Aleister had not killed her. She had been intentionally removed from the list of targets and spared.

Aleister had control of the scene.

There was no overturning things with trickery at this point.

"Now, then."

"…"

"Oh, don't pretend to be a mere beast, Coronzon. You were always a whisperer. Although I will admit it is more frightening when the demon-possessed shout unintelligible nonsense instead of just making pathetic threats."

"…You can't."

This was a new voice.

It did not belong to the short bikini girl, but it also did not belong to Lola Stuart. It may have been an unprovable voice that sounded different to everyone who heard it.

"You can't possibly do it. All you know is failure and defeat, so how can you save some-…?"

"X-rays."

Aleister cut her off while holding the baby to her chest with one arm.

She sounded like she was trying to decide what to cook for dinner.

“CT scans, MRIs, blood tests, gas chromatography, ultrasound, centrifuges, transmission electron microscopes, polymerase chain reaction DNA tests, and…yes, how about I prepare a cyclotron particle accelerator as well? With all that, slicing up Karasuma Fran’s body and inspecting the contents would be a simple task. … From head to toe, I can inspect every last molecule of her body. And that will tell me where your filthy traces have taken root and what I must attack to eliminate your influence.”

Spiritual Tripping only used the spell user’s gesture to paint a picture of the “weapon” in the target’s brain and create a foothold for influencing them.

Could it really go this far?

Did a forcibly implanted imagination really have such a wide range?

“It’s no Imagine Breaker, but I suppose I will reveal a little trick of mine. Do you know what this is?”

Aleister’s right hand moved. As soon as her fingers seemed to mime holding a pencil, the target’s scenery was entirely changed. The illusion danced like a spinning pen. It resembled a pencil, but it was not one. It resembled a highlighter, but it was not one. It resembled a tablet stylus, but it *could not be* one of those either. The target desperately tried to picture some other image to muddy the implanted one, but she could not keep up. As much as she wished otherwise, she could tell the color, shape, weight, texture, and sheen all accurately narrowed in on a specific “weapon”.

And once she knew what it was, there was no escaping the image.

Just like someone trying to forget the phrase “purple mirror” and only focusing on it all the more. She knew she was only restraining herself, but she could not control her own thoughts.

“Are you trying to bind me…human?”

“A single visual fixes the image in your mind, captures you in its grasp, and robs you of all freedom. Using this sort of exchange to seal off your opponent’s options and guide their thoughts into a dead end is a fundamental part of magical combat. And real experts place a great emphasis on the fundamentals. A true chef will train their skill to the point that they can surprise a guest with a simple fried egg.”

There was clear mockery in that smile.

It was the look of someone who had already secured their method of killing.

“That big bang…well, it was technically ten times that, but it created a great many things. Radiation was one of those and it is a powerful medicine that can be used for good or bad. As a powerful medicine, it cannot be taken lightly, but when used right, it can become a ‘weapon’ that saves the life of someone who cannot be saved by any other method.”

That grim reaper who had taken the form of a girl had robbed his opponent of her foolish hostage strategy that used her own body as a shield.

After all…

“A gamma knife. When a brain tumor is surrounded by the delicate organ and is thus inoperable, this medical tool can pass through their body and accurately burn through just the miniscule target. Oh, my apologies. Was that explanation unnecessary? I am sure someone as wise and knowledgeable as you was already well aware of all that.”

“…”

“And don’t worry. No matter how much Karasuma Fran struggles, ‘*I will accurately excise you and only you*. Until not a speck of you remains. So rest easy and struggle all you like.”

“＿＿＿＿＿”

“Devouring a live meal is nice every so often, don’t you think?”

“……
……!!!???”

No one and nothing could stop it.

A nightmarish operation made up of acrobatic actions had begun.

Between the Lines 4

However.

This battle may not have had any real meaning.

Excising the demon infesting the delicate brain or heart was meaningless when the source patient remained elsewhere and could re-infect them. And it was Aleister Crowley herself who had launched the largest source of the disease out of reach.

That is, into space.

In the eternal isolation of the Windowless Building, the angel and demon approached the conclusion of their battle.

“…I see. So this is as far it goes this time.”

That pained voice came from Aiwass.

Avatar Lola Stuart's slender hand grasped his neck and pointlessly lifted him from the floor in the weightlessness of space.

"After holding back with Lilith for so long, you must have known the importance of a physical vessel. Whatever you may be, an avatar is necessary if you wish to influence this physical world. You can try to fill the gap with tricks, but that is not enough to match my ultimate strength gained the proper way."

"Heh."

Even now, Aiwass continued to smile.

"My fixation on the world of the living ended when Academy City's AIM diffusion field was used to release Lilith into the world. I will resume observing from the background. Yes, Coronzon, I will relax and observe the story of a most foolish demon's defeat."

"Are you sure you want those to be your last words?"

"Then I will add a few more. …It is time you experienced the loneliness of Urashima Tarou, you mere debris."

That was all.

Lola felt the sensation of something breaking and she casually tossed the remains aside. Aiwass's presence had vanished from the body that simply floated instead of falling to the floor.

"Now, then."

Lola took a breath and then set to work completing each of the necessary tasks.

She operated the banished Windowless Building's helm to change

its direction and fly back toward the blue planet. This was not enough to spell doom for the calamity named Coronzon. The building broke back into the atmosphere, tore through the upper atmosphere, and maintained its top speed while flying straight toward western Tokyo like a javelin.

What did satellite weapons matter? Who cared about ballistic missile countermeasures? Why even bring up anti-air defense weapons?

This was a fully enclosed environment built for space travel. Ironically, it was Aleister who had given the Windowless Building's sturdiness the stamp of approval. It did not matter that they city had missiles, lasers, anti-air guns, high-power EM waves, and many other safety measures. It would all be turned to ashes when the building powered through it all and hit the ground.

Coronzon felt no fear of the scorching atmosphere.

She had a glass of water.

And if she was to enjoy that perfectly ordinary water to its fullest, she was the one who would have to change. Drinking it in an air-conditioned room kept at the perfect temperature was not enough. Leaving that room and crossing a scorching desert would work much better.

Coronzon's true nature was dispersion. She destroyed the world's laws like she was tearing apart two lovers. So this was only natural.

It was the same as ever-so-carefully building a house of cards or lining up dominoes.

To enjoy the destruction, she first had to create the thing to be destroyed.

(Those fools think they've won, but I'll show them the usual failure and defeat.)

She laughed.

She scoffed.

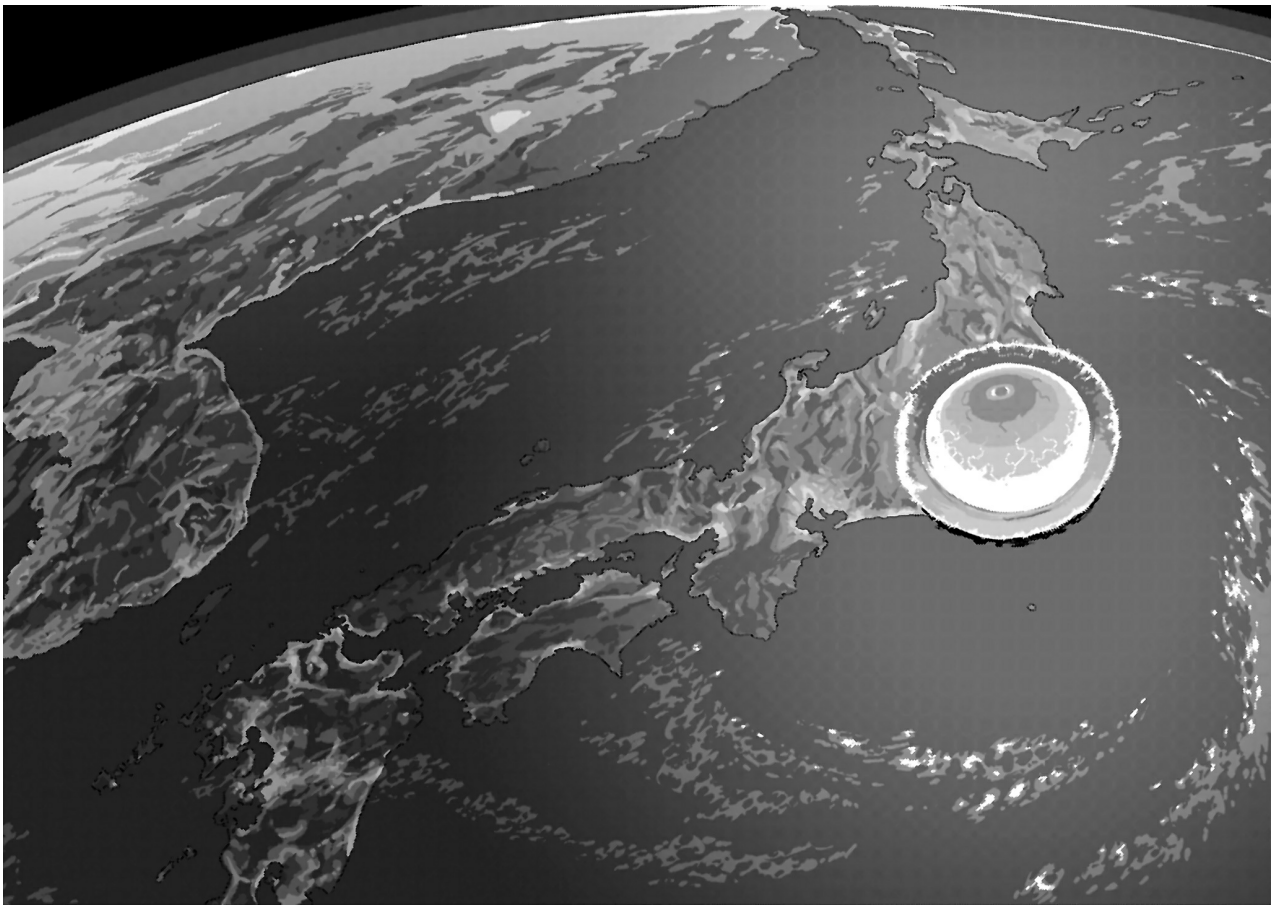
She sneered.

"My numerical value is 333 and my nature is dispersion. I prevent the true bonding of all the world's laws and I bring endless chaos and destruction."

She had of course never even considered braking.

She had such a great mass moving at such a great speed.

"My name is Coronzon. Now learn firsthand just what that name means!!"



As soon as the building hit, Academy City was wholly annihilated.

It began at one point.

From there, fearsome destruction spread in all directions. The skyscrapers released a great downpour of glass before they were torn from their foundations and thrown to the ground. The asphalt covering the surface was torn up and stripped away, the lines of cars were tossed into the air like paper boxes, and the schools, parks, music halls, movie theaters, and all other shelters were crushed with nothing to support them.

There was no escape.

For one thing, this was not limited to the one little city.

The fearsome impact and shaking sent an unbelievable amount of dust high into the sky where it blotted out the sun. This would bring

on a hopeless age of winter. This was the same extreme cold that eradicated the dinosaurs which had once ruled the planet with their great strength, so furless bipedal apes had no hope of overcoming it.

But Coronzon did not let it end there.

Dispersion was a disposition found in everyone. Organizations split apart into small groups of friends which further divided to have time alone. But for Coronzon, that desire extended to the very laws of the world.

Cold, hunger, the fear of an uncertain future.

A fragile group unable to support their own lives would readily cling to a simple miracle.

And that increased the joy she felt in the moment she deprived them of that.

What if a single beam of light shined on a single point on the -50 degree planet like a spotlight? A gentle warmth, all the food and water one could want, and a place to sleep. That was all they would need to throw themselves into a hopeless battle where they tore at each other with their nails and bit chunks out of each other.

It was irrelevant whether or not the victor would actually be saved.

In fact, it would be even more fun to give the losers weapons so they could come back for revenge.

With the Archetype Controller, the demon could divide the winners from the losers and life from death.

“Heh heh heh.”

The Windowless Building itself was smashed to pieces.

The great demon inside her avatar looked absolutely delighted in the center of the massive crater.

This was an undeniable truth.

An unchangeable result.

Yes, the end of all human civilization had happened almost too easily.

“Pant, pant. That worked so perfectly. I had intentionally held this great chain reaction in reserve so I could truly enjoy it! Yes, yes, did you think you had won? Did you think you had ended it all without letting anyone die? Hahh, yeah right!! Why would I ever let that happen!? So what was it you did!? Relied on a shred of hope, got the help of a Holy Guardian Angel and an original grimoire, and worked together to bring about an impossible miracle? Was it the perfect setup!? Well, that wasn’t my doing! I was the toilet slipper! One stomp and it was all squashed flat, you fool!! This is it. Yes, this is it. I’ve finally done it. Heh heh heh. Yes, yes, I’ve felt this tension for so very long.”

She imagined it.

She imagined what her enemy had to have looked like as that fiery orange attack filled the sky overhead and yet had no way to avoid it or defend against it. She imagined the agony and screams of a father who could do nothing to save his daughter after having her returned to him after so very long.

A sensual stir ran through her body.

Taking decisive action was so much fun. Just like throwing out all of your old junk while remodeling your room.

She could not bear it.

For so very long, she had yearned for this feeling

The concepts of karma or “just deserts” did not matter. In fact, it was so much more fun when it was entirely unfair and absurd. When someone had built something up with extreme care, she would cause an unexpected coincidence. When people experienced great fortune, she would swat them all down to the ground and crush them there. And she would sneer at them all the while. That was a great demon. That was Coronzon. Someone who divided their actions between good and evil and sought excuses and justifications for everything they did would never even realize this form of entertainment existed.

She recalled foolish Aiwass’s command to never stop working toward being *happy*. But only the extremely ordinary would apply that concept to pursuit of the pleasure signals brought about by the basic necessities and in efforts to reproduce. Procuring food, preparing a bed to sleep in, and leaving behind descendants were all things that the millions of animal and insect species did every day.

But seeking pure cruelty or tormenting and destroying others for reasons other than eating or self-defense was something found in very few life forms in the natural world.

Humans were one of those.

The descendants of those apes who learned to walk upright and whose fur fell out should have been seated at the foot of a chosen elite’s table. But they were unable to fully throw out the animalistic and primitive desire for “happiness” and mistook the protection of their silly brain chemicals for acts of good or justice, so they could not reach out and grab the fruit that was hanging within reach. She could only call that foolish. They did not understand that the only reason they had let their true cruelty wither away unused was because they had given up on thinking and fallen to the level of a

mere animal focused on thrusting its hips.

Coronzon was an intelligent lifeform.

So if she was to stave off boredom, she would do it in a way those common hip-thrusting animals could not.

She knew the polite way to deal in cruelty.

She was familiar with the courteous way to engage with others in cruelty.

She understood the graceful way to decorate herself with cruelty.

“Those non-functioning cruelty impotents thought they were so great.”

Lola laughed and spat out those words, but then she noticed something.

The stench of blood and flesh was missing.

Even if she had dropped such a large mass on Academy City and crushed the entire city, would it really be blown away so cleanly? It was a densely populated area with a population of 2.3 million. If she had squashed them all with the fly swatter, the powerful stench of death should have hit her like an invisible wall.

It was too clean.

It was too clear.

Yes, almost like…*there had never been a human race on this planet.*

“Wha-…?”

Just as Lola grew suspicious, something reached her ears.

They were voices which sounded incredibly out of place.

“Huh? Hey, Nephthys, some neat-looking toy just fell out of the sky.”

“You’re right, Niang-Niang. It isn’t every day that someone wanders into this sealed timeline without permission.”

Lola Stuart was not so stupid that she did not know what this meant.

For one thing, it had been Coronzon herself who used Karasuma Fran to guide Kamisato Kakeru into Academy City so he would make a mess of Aleister’s plans. She had of course received reports on the annihilation of the many Magic Gods along the way.

“The exiled Magic Gods…? Wait, then this earth must be…!?”

“Hmm.” Despite the groan, the modified mini-China dress girl with pale skin did not actually seem to give it any thought. “This is a time-shifted place, much like the excess frames on a film, that Kamisato Kakeru’s World Rejecter exiled us to as a prison, right? Then did you maybe get caught by some part of relativity? Like how approaching the speed of light causes the flow of time to slow?”

“For example, *if you set out on a long-distance space journey intended to leave the solar system and then made a U-turn,* it’s possible you could have gotten shifted from your origin point and ended up on the time axis of *this earth* instead. It would take miraculous odds for it to happen, though.”

It finally hit her.

She realized why Human Aleister had launched Coronzon into space and why Aiwass had intentionally lost and made his exit before they arrived at *this earth*.

What was it he had said?

“It is time you experienced the loneliness of Urashima Tarou, you mere debris.”

And there was one problem more important than the logic behind this.

…Unlike the proper earth where 6 or 7 billion lived, *this earth* contained no lifeforms, human or otherwise. Here, there were only the Magic Gods who had mastered the field of magic until they had achieved the title of a god. Only those true beasts who were satisfied so long as they could wield their extraordinary power without being a nuisance and who were willing to engage each other in unceasing combat in this eternally-regenerating prison where they could go all out.

And now they had found a new toy.

A new rule, never before seen in online mode, had been added.

The Magic Gods gathered around, licked their lips, and spoke up in unison. Just as Coronzon herself had wanted, they did not even attempt to hide their extreme cruelty.

“Looks like we aren’t going to be bored for a while.”

Epilogue: A Throneless Demon Roars in Hell – The_Devil_"C".

With her light returned, Human Aleister Crowley was devastating.

Even if it had happened when she had intentionally let herself sink to the bottom, Kamijou Touma could not believe he had once defeated this monster. That spiky-haired high school boy had the rare experience of seeing both a true Magic God and the Golden magicians at their peak, but that was exactly why he was so confused. If this human could do this, could she really be classified as a human? Why was she not known as a Magic God? He was having trouble getting a hold on the vague definition he had accepted.

Ending something through an act of salvation had to be dozens of times more difficult than ending it through an act of killing.

And Aleister had done it at Coronzon's level.

Both Index and Karasuma Fran had been taken hostage.

Kamijou would have been at a loss as to what to do after that, but Aleister had *mercilessly saved them both.* The fearsome skill involved was apparent even to an amateur observer.

Every time she had failed or lost, she had definitely grown a bit stronger.

This was different again from Othinus who had lost her power as a god and been turned into a fairy after a battle that involved the entire world. Kamijou could not imagine defeating this human if they clashed again. …After all, she was at a level where she could

perform accurate brain surgery in the middle of a battle against something as powerful as Coronzon. If he clenched his fist and challenged her with all his might, he could end up receiving a detailed full-body medical examination followed by a scolding for not getting enough to eat on a daily basis.

(I-it's a good thing Mina contained Index in advance. Who knows what would've happened if she had tried to attack Aleister.)

That was when he heard a liquid dripping to the ground.

This was clearly different from the cold December rain.

The silver-haired girl had a hand over her mouth with a dark red liquid spilling out between her fingers.

"Aleister!?"

"You are familiar with magic recoil, aren't you? That is the spray created by the collisions between phases. I am not like Mathers or Westcott. When I contain that recoil in my body instead of allowing the sparks to escape to elsewhere in the real world, you have to expect something like this."

"…"

"Don't give me that look. This is the joyous proof that my power is not being a nuisance to anyone else."

Aleister slowly took a deep breath to endure the pain.

"Uuh…"

Meanwhile, Index groaned in Kamjou's arms. He could not imagine how bad the original grimoire's toxin would be, but she had to have a high resistance to it. He could only pray that Mina Mathers was correct about the poison acting as a medicine.

The girl magician holding a baby sighed disinterestedly.

"If all went as planned, foolish Coronzon should be falling into our trap about now. I don't know how much that will restrain her, but we need to make use of what time it does give us."

"?"

"I am not optimistic enough to think something like World Rejecter will trap her for all eternity. I mean, if she could be thrown in there without using the owner's right hand, then she can get out the same way."

"Eh? World Rejecter? Is Kamisato causing trouble again!?"

It looked like the idiot's idiocy was going to blame someone for something they did not do, but Aleister did not bother correcting him. It had been the Kamisato Faction that caused so much damage to Academy City, primarily with the microwave heat wave, and that was what allowed Coronzon to take Aleister by surprise. *As usual, that failure had ultimately worked out in her favor* since she had learned of her other daughter's whereabouts and the name of the enemy she needed to defeat, but she probably still felt a need to get back at Kamisato in some way.

"Coronzon has free use of Lola Stuart as an avatar, so she will of course have used her position as Archbishop to give instructions in the Anglican Church's name and embed some kind of trickery in the United Kingdom and the 53 nations of the Commonwealth bound to them by treaties. Until we dig up and dispose of all that, we cannot defeat Coronzon. Even if we temporarily drive her away, she will recover and attack again."

"…Is it just me or did the scale of this just get a lot bigger?"

"We are talking about one of the three great Catholic churches. The

more than a billion Aleister Crowleys who split off from me are currently attacking those nations. That should be enough for the various Commonwealth nations, but it is unknown if they can fully bring down England itself. To be absolutely certain, *this me* must leave Academy City and join the battle."

"Hold on a second. Why did you just use an individual's name alongside a number rivalling the population of China or India!? You can't just all of a sudden increase the population of the earth by more than 10%!! That'll introduce a whole bunch of problems like the food and oil supply!!"

Aleister held her empty hand to her mouth.

"Oh, dear," she said with a straight face. "I seem to have screwed up again. I hadn't thought it through that far."

"Just to be sure, your whole life of constant failure wasn't just due to you being extremely myopic and trying things without thinking them through, was it?"

This explained why the Mina Mathers supercomputer had been guiding Aleister until now. In fact, she had been that bad even with Mina's guidance. If Mina did not strip off her mourning clothes and change into a maid uniform, the future of the human race was in trouble.

"That would make her a legit British maid with cat ears. But that's all wrong for a young widow!! It's as awful a combination as a vanilla and offal hotpot! There's something wrong with this picture in my mind!"

"You seem to have some crossed wires in your brain. Now, you can train to be channeler if you wish, but if you do not learn to control yourself first, the spirits will control you."

"No, wait. I shouldn't just go with my immediate reaction. What if I imagine she's a young woman trying to bear with that outfit as the embarrassing result of a punishment game? And what if – yes, just hypothetically – what if she was a dorm manager? So it would be Mina Mathers blushing, fidgeting, and unsure what to do with herself in that frilly outfit? My god, it's beautiful! Why was I trying to stamp out this possibility with a hasty decision? I'm so stupid, stupid, stupid!!!!!"

"Hey, if you don't come back to your senses soon, I'll kiss you. With tongue."

Once he received an unprecedented threat from a historical dirty old man, Kamijou's mind was instantly dragged back to reality. In a way, he felt about as much fear as he had while chased around by the mummy High Priest. He knew this utter moron would not hold back even if she was holding her baby.

"Does this cruel reality really have more it wants to throw at me? I've had about enough of all this, so I just want to go home and get some sleep."

"Don't be silly. You need to make some preparations first, but you will be coming with me."

"Excuse me?" replied Kamijou like it had to be a joke.

He truly did not want to believe it, but his doubts were soundly rejected.

Human Aleister clarified.

"Again, you will be joining the battle to conquer England so we can fully eradicate Coronzon. Sorry, but this has already been decided."

"Umm, you shot me twice and I've been running around nonstop

ever since. So what if I just say no?"

"A fair question. *This me* has no authority or assets…so I have no choice. I will just have to win you over with my body."

Thinking☆Time!!

…He could not let her surface appearance fool him. His heart was pierced by as great a shock as when he essentially saw that old mummy setting up a pillow that said "yes" on the front and "no" on the back.

One problem remained for Hamazura Shiage.

It was that object with a pale blue light flickering between the gaps of its armor.

"I still can't seem to get it off. What am I supposed to do about this Processor Suit, Aneri!?"

"Hamazura."

"Takitsubo-shan! Yes, you can always count on your lovely girlfriend to be worried for-…"

"If you're having trouble, you should probably just have Kinuhata or Mugino force it open with their powers."

"Wait, you Santa from hell!! If I leave this to that human bulldozer and human tunnel boring machine, I'll be torn up into scraps along with this mass of cutting-edge tech!! I can just see them tilting their heads in confusion when a dark red liquid oozes out from the gaps and it stops moving!!"

Hamazura and Takitsubo whispered to each other like a couple in

love as they watched a cosplay woman in a bizarre combination of mourning clothes and cat ears cut across the hospital parking lot.

"Surely there's a lever or handle somewhere," said Takitsubo.

"I've searched all over and haven't found anything."

"Hm? Hmm???"

"Um, young lady? Don't crouch down between my legs like that. It makes for quite the visual from this angle!!"

"There's a small hole here. Only about a millimeter."

"Eh? There? How embarrassing! …And how am I supposed to interpret this? Like lovers searching out each other's moles???"

"It's like the thing for forcing open a CD tray when it's stuck."

"Wait, don't shove a straightened hairpin in there! That's not a smartphone's SIM card, so it's not just going to pop out so easi-…"

With several sounds of something being cut with an arc welder, all the armor came apart and Hamazura Shiage made his debut.

The pale light running across various parts of the armor had entirely vanished and it must have been lined with detonating cords because accurate lines of orange sparks raced along it instead.

That might sound ridiculous, but it was meant for emergency removal. If it was too complex to reach in a time of need, it would have been useless.

However, that was not the most important point for Hamazura and Takitsubo.

Santa Girl Takitsubo Rikou had crouched down with no concern for her miniskirt in order to check near the guy's crotch and Hamazura Shiage had just appeared in front of her in only his underwear.

They should have considered it. Hadn't A. O. Francisca – that is, Karasuma Fran – appeared from her Processor Suit as a bikini girl despite the winter season? And she had had a legitimate reason for that: so the suit could read the electrical signals in the surface of her skin. The foreshadowing had been there!!

And with that part of his anatomy shoved in front of her face, Takitsubo-chan the Busty Santa spoke in a low voice.

"…Hamazura…"

"Wait, this wasn't my fault! I really don't like the way you're holding that straightened hairpin there! What are you planning to do to me!?"

"I'm not sure I buy your concern when you're getting kind of cheerful down here…"

"…Heh heh."

"——————————"

"No, wait! Really, I'm serious, just waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiii

Case closed.

They all lived happily ever after.

That was how it looked, but the world was not so kind.

"…Is that them?"

Someone stood on the asphalt as cold rain poured down through the December night.

It was a white-haired and red-eyed monster.

He was Academy City's #1 Level 5, Accelerator.

"I have no idea how this happened and I don't really care what tricks you've used. But the board chairman who's been running Academy City from the very top is this silver-haired brat, right?"

"…"

Hamazura Shiage also slowly walked over.

The presence or absence of the Processor Suit meant little here. The cold December rain was hard to bear in nothing but his underwear, but he knew he had to give this top priority.

Kamijou Touma, Accelerator, and Hamazura Shiage.

The three of them exchange a glance in the chilly night.

Then there was a dull sound of scraping metal.

Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage had both pulled a weapon on Aleister.

Academy City's #1 held a light military handgun that looked like a

toy since it was made from layered plastic.

The former Skill Out leader must have been worried about the Swords and Firearms Control Law because he stepped on the plastic cover on the end of a broken umbrella on the ground, pulled straight up on the grip, and exposed a piece of sharp metal. It was a makeshift rapier meant for stabbing.

Both of them were deadly weapons capable of taking this soft girl's life.

This was no time to be worrying about the pain of his injuries. Without thinking, Kamijou Touma stood protectively in front of the silver-haired girl holding a baby.

"Hey…what are you thinking!?"

"Answer me this: What reason do you have to protect them?" Accelerator clenched his teeth while he stood in the icy December rain with his modern design cane. "Academy City Board Chairman Aleister is the orchestrator of all the tragedy in this city. They're the source of all the blood and guts splattered through the back alleys here! I don't know what they were planning, but if they hadn't tried to make it happen, none of this tragedy would've happened!"

"…Well…"

"You can't just write off everything they've done because 'all's well that ends well'. Whether you were blinded by greed or were nudged in that direction by someone, everyone is carrying something like that. We're living on despite the suffering. You can't just set that burden aside because it's heavy!! You have to face it! Face yourself, you son of a bitch!! If you can't do that, I'll grab you by the hair and make you look! It's the same damn thing you've done to so many other people!!"

Kamijou had his back to Aleister and thus could not see the look on her face. He glanced in the direction of the black cat witch who stood a short distance away, but she only shook her head. Even if she was going to stay with Aleister Crowley, she was not going to erase all the hatred and grudges that human had earned.

The boy gulped and looked to Hamazura who was also wielding a weapon.

"…Is that how you see it too?"

"…"

"You're the one that protected Lilith all this time, right? Would you not have saved her in the first place if you'd known she was Aleister's kid!?"

The heavy silence that followed felt like having lead poured into his gut.

The sound of the rain seemed like enough to burst his eardrums.

But finally, Hamazura Shiage moved while holding his makeshift rapier created by removing the protective plastic cover from the tip of a broken umbrella.

He broke the already-broken umbrella frame in half.

And he shoved the two sharp ends toward Kamijou Touma and Accelerator's faces.

"…!!"

"…!?"

They both glared intensely back at him, but he could not take it back now. He slowly took a breath and then spoke.

"…I honestly don't care either way."

"You went this far when you don't even-…!!"

"Yeah, I'm fine being just one of the masses. It's not like I have the power to protect or destroy the world. All I have is one puny vote. But I'll use that vote to its fullest. I'll shove it right into the middle of your conflict. You're stuck at 50 vs. 50, so I'll cast the final vote that decides the whole damn thing!!"

The sweaty boy in just his underwear looked to the silver-haired girl behind Kamijou.

"I only have one demand. I want some kind of insurance other than the Parameter List file that was lost during the heat wave. I want some kind of amnesty that will protect me, Takitsubo, Item, and the others!! Something that will protect us from the dark side!! Say yes and I'll risk my life to protect you. Say no and I'll take in Lilith and let you die. Make your choice, board chairman!!"

To repeat, Kamijou could not see Aleister's expression while standing in front of her.

But there was clear mockery in the breath that reached his ears.

"How convenient for you."

"…Is that your answer?"

"But a demand has no value if you lack the ability to grant your end of the bargain. But fine. If you will follow me, then I will grant you your extraordinary request. Make sure to fight hard enough to make up for the part of your promise you cannot grant on your own."

Then something happened that surprised even Kamijou.

The silver-haired girl stepped out in front of the spiky-haired boy who had supposedly been her shield. She pushed Lilith into Hamazura's arms and then unhesitatingly walked right up to Academy City's #1.

"This one step alone is not part of my plan."

"…"

"Look, this is the world 'outside the mastermind's wishes' you so longed for. *Welcome to the end of the children's rules.* Now, what will you do? From here on, you cannot shift blame for any of your actions. You must bear responsibility for your own actions. With that in mind, let me ask you something: what do you want to do with that gun and your powers?"

"…You've convinced me of one thing."

Accelerator's voice was even icier than the December rain.

And that monster aimed the gun upwards as he spoke.

"There would be no point in doing anything now. I'll remind you what fear is. Only then will I settle this."

"As you wish."

Did it make her a monster to bow so elegantly in front of that monster?

It had all seemed ridiculous, so Kamijou had let a lot of it slide. But there was clearly something dangerous about the way Aleister had readily entered a hotel or sauna as a silver-haired girl. That magician used her own failures, defeats, setbacks, and losses to help herself grow, but she never did calculate out the actual risk any of it would place on herself.

They were in agreement.

And the great magician who was willing to violate any taboo whispered in a sweet voice that dragged all who heard it into a bottomless bog.

That girl spoke the name of the abyss.

"Next stop: England. Let's draw out all our strength and go on a rampage."

And.

"Abh, hh, abhahh…!!!??"

Somewhere in Academy City, a portion of the perfectly normal scenery split apart and an arm burst out. It sank down, rose back up, and then pulled out a face and torso along with it. At that point, several arms grabbed at the hair and clothing and dragged it all back down again.

"Ooahh!!"

Even so, that being had returned.

Avatar Lola Stuart.

And Coronzon within.

With multiple Magic Gods clinging to her like the sludge of a bottomless bog, she had taken one last large step to force her way back from World Rejecter's shifted timeline.

"Oh, crap! We got carried away and played around a little too much!"

"Oh, dear…. This is not good. The crack has sealed back up."

A modified mini-China dress girl with pale skin and a sexy woman with bandages wrapped around her brown skin had been dragged up with her. Those two sounded panicked for once, but it was too late now. They had made so many compromises to reach that catastrophic paradise, but the door had already sealed up tight.

Lola gasped for breath with them tangled around and clinging to her.

And she sensed someone's gaze on her.

Someone was looking down on her as she tried to gather her strength and stand up like a newborn fawn.

Their appearance had entirely changed.

The fact that they were now a young girl felt very immature.

But Coronzon immediately saw through it.

"Alei…ster…"

"Oh, would you look at that. It seems I have an absolute victory on my hands for once. How about I give you the throne of the needy while we are at it? I mean, with you back, Academy City is in a precarious position. It really is no laughing matter for me."

"Shut it, you hip-thrusting animal. Your failures and defeats change nothing. I am the one who watches it all and laughs."

"It's quite sad seeing a nude ape pointing and laughing at me. It doesn't even make me angry or exasperated. I just feel sad for you. Did you really think I would simply hand over Academy City if I could have predicted this would happen?"

Then something happened.

With a deep noise, the lights illuminating the dark night were all extinguished.

The great demon was dumbfounded and the human sneered down at her.

Yes, it was now Aleister's turn to laugh.

She toyed with a stamp-sized flash memory card between her fingers.

"You tried to take control of the Bank using A. O. Francisca, but it was Hamazura Shiage who ultimately gained the parent device. When he purged the whole thing without asking, I will admit I panicked and thought I had failed yet again, but that exposed the circuitry inside and allowed me to find the port for plugging in this flash memory. So I used that to send out a virus that shut down every last computer. Yes, that general word gets the idea across a lot better than a more specific one like malware or worm, doesn't it? Just like Holy Guardian Angel or Great Demon."

"Wha-…?"

"You can't really give a virus an overall rank, but I feel confident calling this one the most brutally wide-scale there is since it brought down the entire network while Misaka Mikoto's cyber attacks would only break through one targeted barrier. Yes, this affected both Academy City and all the cooperative organizations scattered around the world. Well, I left enough leeway for the medical and research equipment and to ensure the astronauts in the satellites aren't harmed. Yes, that means this blackout has not abandoned any of the badly injured, so don't worry about that. I made sure to build in a failsafe for that by basing it on field hospital construction techniques. I will do this right. So you only have to

focus on lamenting your own bad luck. After all, this means all your research data and next-generation weapons are entirely unusable."

What did that mean?

Aleister savored the look of dawning realization on her archenemy's face.

"This is not something you can solve by brute forcing a random number table. Human or not, any mind but mine would need 20,000 years to fully eliminate this virus. Oh, and don't worry about Lilith's physical vessel. I can create that even without the equipment here. Now, then. Given this result, I think it is time for an announcement: Because the citywide blackout cannot be fixed anytime soon, all residents are to evacuate the affected area to ensure a minimum standard of living for the students. …Now you cannot stop the exodus of the city's greatest success: the people. No matter how comfortable the city is, these are teenage boys and girls. If they are free to leave and they have no functioning bathrooms here, no one will want to stay. Especially when they only just recalled what comfort is like after recovering from the heat wave. It would have been one thing if this was the first time, but having it taken away again now will be hard to bear. I will also have the Sisters and Fuse Kazakiri scatter, hide, and escape your grasp. But not to worry. Now that I have dealt with Aiwass's fixation, I can manage a short gap. Do you understand what all this means?"

"It can't be…"

"As I said before, I will give you Academy City. Assuming, that is, you have any need for a deserted and desolate ghost town without a single bit of accessible data."

She raised her leg high despite her short skirt.

"I came to understand some things in the fight against A. O. Francisca. First, your possession is a threat, but Karasuma Fran proved that your avatars' lives are not fully snuffed out. Second, since you bothered to come back, you must care about Lola's body. …In other words, some of it remains there, no matter how faint it might be. And don't even bothering asking what I am talking about. Honestly, if you weren't so damn unkillable, I would have failed yet again. For that alone, I must thank you."

She held her leg above Lola's head while she was pinned down by multiple Magic Gods and unable to move.

"This is a declaration of war."

Now that she had decided to oppose Lola, she showed no mercy.

"I *will* take back my daughter. So wait for me in your lonely castle, you filthy bug."

With that said, Aleister Crowley stomped hard on the great demon's head.

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This is *New* Testament, yet we're already at Volume 19! This one was centered on Hamazura and focused on Academy City's dark side for the first time in a while. The previous volume revealed that there was never really any clear division between the magic side and science side and began to shake up even the dark side of Academy City, so I thought I could enjoy that period of change.

I had Hamazura be the main character with Accelerator bringing the important points into focus and then having them both meet up with Kamijou and Aleister in the end. That last part would be the major difference between this and OT15 and 19. I thought it would create a new sense of exhilaration if I made Academy City's dark side look isolated but then show how the root of it all was tied into the previous volumes' story.

What did you think of that?

I worked hard to make sure that Hamazura's Processor Suit and Aneri's assistance would look like something fun to use. By comparing it to a dance game and having him do incredible Chinese martial arts moves, I tried making it sound like Hamazura did not really understand what he was doing and was simply using the best words he could to describe his impression of it.

I have already written AI characters with Mina Mathers in the

previous volume and Maxwell in the free novels on my official site, but I tried to give Aneri a unique personality as the “silent girl”. But she is different again from Abyss in Boo Boo, so I think the main point is that she has grown into a seemingly-obedient but actually rather wild and rebellious AI that confirms the bathroom function in the interrogation room or refuses to give any advice because she does not want Hamazura to get along any better with the people around him.

For Coronzon’s “minions”, those two should have been the obvious examples once you knew Lola was behind it all.

With Index and A. O. Francisca, I wanted to have them one-shotted by something built up over the previous volumes instead of some new concept or weapon introduced in this volume. It would have been one thing if Hamazura had defeated her, but since Aleister was doing it, it kind of had to be like this.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san, to my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, and Nakajima-san, and to Kasai Shin-san who designed the Processor Suit. To think I would write a volume where the protagonist spends the whole time as a masked man. …I think that restriction had to be even more difficult than Girl Aleister, Lola, Lilith, or A. O. Francisca (the Futakuchi Onna). I am truly grateful that you keep putting up with the crazy things I do.

And I give my thanks to the readers. Mina Mathers did not die when she should have and Lilith herself went on a rampage. What did you think? Perhaps she should have been allowed to step down from the stage after everything was tied up so emotionally, but I thought this series’ Aiwass would not allow that just because her surroundings had set everything up so perfectly. If you place his benevolence and malice on the scale, it would tilt just slightly toward benevolence. I hope you could accept this kind world.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

But make no mistake; this series' Aiwass is not a particularly good person.

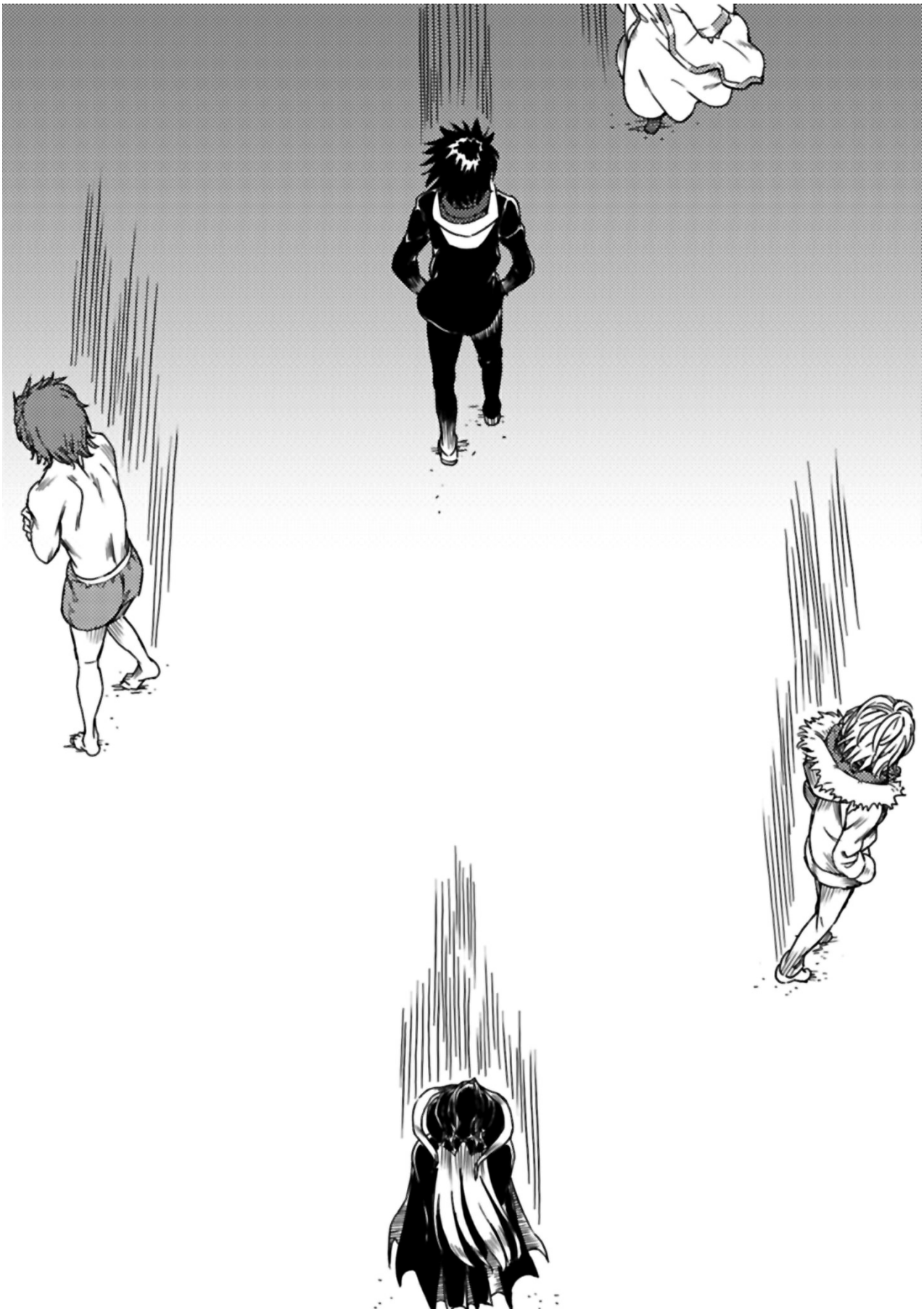
-Kamachi Kazuma

?

The contract was made.

As Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage set out with their eyes on their respective objectives, Kamijou glanced toward the silver-haired girl in the rain.

Aleister Crowley.



“Do you need something?”

“No…” Kamijou looked to that silver-haired girl holding Lilith in her blanket. “I’m not trying to copy what Accelerator said, but I also think you could stand to remember what normal fear is like.”

“Really? Well, I can’t blame you. I have made a mess of your life for my own ends.”

“No, not because of that.”

“?”

Aleister looked puzzled when Kamijou shook his head.

And Kamijou Touma continued speaking to the silver-haired girl holding a baby.

“Otherwise, you can’t hold your head high. From here on, it isn’t just about your own learning. And you have to teach all that to Lilith as well. Right, board chairman?”

That was all.

Kamijou walked over to where Index, Othinus, and the others waited. The boy had his own objective in sight, so there was no hesitation in his gait.

“…”

With Lilith in her arms, Aleister watched him leave.

Without saying a single unnecessary word.

And now the stage shifts to England.

Their target is Great Demon Coronzon’s Achilles’ heel. Those boys are on the move to cut through it all.

Thus Spoke the Kumokawa Sisters

“Onee-chaaan…”

“God, that’s creepy!”

Laziness must have taken root in the room’s owner because the luxury apartment grew cluttered if you took your eyes off of it for two seconds. The sexy high schooler(?) named Kumokawa Seria showed no mercy with her comment, but her younger sister Maria was usually the one to look down on her and lecture her on her uncleanliness. When that girl began speaking sweetly to inspire a protective desire, it was time to be cautious.

She had black hair but wore it in ringlet curls, she wore a maid uniform but her lucky color was yellow, and she was younger but she looked down on her older sister. That younger sister was a strange mix on both the mental and physical side.

“Maika from my school says she’s moving away all of a sudden. All she sent me was a single email. She says it’ll be about the same thanks to social media, but of course it’ll be different! That idiot!! She’s changing schools and leaving the country! Wahhh, how am I supposed to process this sadness all on my own?”

Her older sister put on a gentle expression and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Count yourself lucky you got an email. I didn’t even get that. … That bastard just up and runs off to World War 3 or joins forces with the enemy’s big boss, makes an enemy of the world, and runs all over Denmark…”

“This scary Onee-chan evil spirit is super scary.”

Nothing could beat reality, so when the older sister pressed in with more pressure than an intense 8K screen, the younger sister switched over to her highly-obedient maid mode.

“So your friend is moving away, huh? That’s a surprisingly normal issue for you.”

“…I’m not too confident this can be called normal.”

“Eh? Then is there something indecent behind all this? So my little sister is getting all yuri with another maid at her girl’s school? That’s as strange a mix as ever…”

“If that’s the first thing that came to mind, you really must be pent-up.”

The sisters adorably rolled around the trash-filled room grabbing at each other’s hair.

“Having someone suddenly disappear is so hard to bear. It makes my skin crawl.”

“Why?”

“…You have to ask? Um, because of Sensei.”

The “Sensei” that Maria mentioned while pouting her lips was someone that very few people would find any information on if they searched his name. In fact, Maria herself would not find anything.

Kihara Kagun.

He was the greatest and worst of the Kiharas and this little sister truly understood that kind face that could not be found in any medium.

Seria sighed at Maria's extremely complicated situation.

"Sister."

"No, I've gotten over that. I've accepted his death. I'm not asking you to rub my head and calm me down…"

"I thought this was about some floral yuri, but it's actually a filthy student-teacher thing? The pendulum has swung back so hard I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Just so you know, if you say anything to defile this, I will unleash a merciless roundhouse kick even if you are family."

The middle school girl who could freely control centrifugal force lowered her voice in a threat and then had a thought.

(Honestly. I just hope Maika isn't carrying some terrible burden behind the scenes like Sensei was.)

Her older sister did not seem to get it, so Maria found a good chance to leave.

You would never have thought Academy City had just experienced an unprecedented heat wave with how Christmasy the streets looked. A war over cake orders must have been underway because part-time miniskirt Santas filled the sidewalks. That was a scene Maria hoped the elementary school kids of District 13 never saw, since it would destroy their dreams.

(I wish we could have had a big Christmas celebration that doubled as a goodbye party. Then I would have had a real reason to bake a cake.)

Just as she was thinking about that, a mystery man in a full-body special suit jumped through the December evening sky over her head.

He jumped from building to building and over the main road. He was covered from head to toe in light armor and his identity was fully hidden. Kumokawa Maria gasped when she saw him.

The news played from the roadside displays and airship screens.

“The criminal who attacked a general securities trading office is still on the run. All residents are urged to remain indoors unless you have a pressing reason to leave. I repeat…”

That siren-like announcement never reached her ears. This man wore a full-body suit instead of a thick coat and it was colored black instead of white. But seeing that helmet reminded her of something.

Baggage City in Eastern Europe.

That man had not hesitated to enter that snowy hell to exact his revenge.

“…Sen…sei…?”

Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 19

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